

# **Trails: Pit Miners**

**Pair 2, Book 1 - Tales**

**Gail Brown**

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## **Acknowledgements**

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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# Prologue

"Trails Through the Tales" is a peek at southern North America approximately 250 to 300 years after "Trails Through the Fault Lines" and "Trails Through the Volcano." Earthquakes and volcanoes reopened the North American Seaway, inundating parts of several states with seawater. In the early, hungry days, animals from zoos were released, or eaten. Centuries of warring communities further decimated many populations; at times, leaving several regions without adults, or their history. A small human population survived in a prairie and mountainous region where lions, tigers, and camels now roam.





# Chapter 1

The cow and sheep lodge would be empty soon.

Tanna scampered along the dusty trail beyond the villa.

Logan and Kol barked at her heels. Naom hadn't followed.

Cows mooed and circled their grass empty lodge. They'd be slow moving on the trip to Klapit. Young calves nudged their mothers. Sheep stared off into the distance. Water boxes had been drained and turned upside down to dry during the trip.

Her birth villa necklace dangled at her throat. At the Spring Trade, she'd be expected to add a skill charm to join the ranks of gen 2 adulthood, and choose one of the three dogs she had raised as her own. Logan and Kol were more fun. In reality, Naom would be the choice, because she was female.

With no siblings, the whole community of villas expected her to follow her mother's skill. Zella expected it, and constantly barraged her with questions to verify her knowledge of the ancestor's tales, and healing skills.

Spiritual leader was a dull life. Always on the outside, looking in. Never close to anyone, and always expected to decrease the tensions that arose in the villa, especially in the winter months, when being crowded, and unable to hunt for food, caused chronic grouchiness. Zella complained constantly about having to share teas with angry people who couldn't relax and enjoy peace and quiet.

A cow reached across and nosed her face.

Tanna laughed. At least she wasn't the only one to gain her place in society this Spring Trade. Uden, daughter of Odalen, the clay designer, would join the ranks of gen two adulthood, and gain her first child charm.

If Tanna could recite the tales to the other spiritual leaders in charge of digging the buried treasures of their ancestors, she would gain her place as a spiritual leader as well. If not, there weren't any other skills she had trained for. She'd be charmless, and Zella would be shamed.

At least Robin would appreciate her as she was. Warmth rushed through her. Maybe he would be the sponsor of her first child. With a child, she'd keep her place in the villa until she could learn some

valuable skill. Or, leave her birth villa behind, and learn a skill in another villa. Tuttle weaving would be better than spiritual leader.

Warm air blew in her face from the cow she had stopped petting. Erin's favorite, and named something. Normally only dogs and people had names.

"I'll find you some grass. I need to clear the gate soon anyway."

The grass broke easy in small clumps. She carried a handful to the cow, and several more followed to the wall looking for stray strands.

"Don't feed them! They'll be sick on the walk." Erin stepped into view.

"They eat on the walk. A few bites won't hurt. They'll be chewing happily while we clear the walkway." Tanna pulled more grass and tossed it inside.

Erin's cow herd skill charm had only been received last spring. Her mother had always allowed the cows to clear the walkway, and not expected those gaining gen two status to do the work.

"Where are tools to chop the treelings?"

"Uden will bring them. I have to help Zella finish preparing for the trip."

Erin eyed her and shook her head.

Tanna turned back to pulling grass. Something about their villa wasn't right. Only, it spread through more than Lava. At Fall Trade, people from the villas had mingled as usual. There had been a difference she couldn't quite place.

Like the last few gatherings, Orid, and his friends, had jeered at her. Something about it had been creepier than before.

Robin had stepped up beside her and put his arm around her shoulder.

Her body warmed at the memory.

"If I have to do it all myself, go back to your lodge with Zella," Erin said.

Tanna glanced down. The grass had fallen to her lap. She stood up. Most of the blades scattered off her morning shawl, and fluttered to the ground. A few strands clung tightly around her waist. With a tap to her thigh, the dogs joined her, and she walked past the tree barrier to view the Grass Sea beyond Lava.

The Grass Sea, a vast open land of unexplored territory the ancestors had once crossed with ease. Fourth gen grandmothers repeated such tales. Only camels, horses, and bison roamed the Grass Sea. They were food for the villas, hunted at the Fall and Spring Trade gatherings.

There had to be other people out there, somewhere.

A horse herd thundered into view. A brown horse herded the mixed colored group of ten or more into a small valley not far away from where Zella gathered herbs.

To travel swiftly across the plains with these creatures, the wind blowing in her face would be better than staying alone in a lodge as Zella did.

She shivered.

Goddess Amber wouldn't allow it.

Zella kept the hairs of a horsetail woven into her medicine bag. She would call Tanna a child if she said she wanted to pet one, let alone ride one.

Goddess Amber had never spoken to Tanna. Zella kept asking. How would the Goddess speak? Zella always said she spoke differently to each leader. Perhaps, she wasn't meant to be a leader.

Horses snorted and raced off.

The dogs brushed against her legs.

Zella would be waiting at the lodge. Dare she admit to wanting to follow the horses?

Logan loped ahead on the trail to the outer edge of the villa.

Kol stayed beside her and leaned against her.

Tanna stopped at the clearing.

The villa bustled with people preparing for the day's walk to Klapit. Zella's lodge sat off, alone, almost out of hearing from the rest of the villa. Many a lonely day and night had she spent alone with Zella, when she would rather have been at the crowded villa pit fire, sharing tales, and singing. Recently, she had gone anyway, ignoring her mother's requests to stay in the lodge.

"There you are," Zella said. "Show me you know how to load everything we need to take. You're gen two now, even if you don't want to be."

"Does that make you a third gen?" Zella didn't look old enough to be third gen. Though she certainly had a wise grandmother look about her. Her second child charm had been sliced, and one half buried with the child whose name had never again been spoken. Other not quite forgotten pains she must carry deep inside.

"Of course. Soon, I'll stay behind with the fourth gen grandmothers. It'll be quiet and peaceful in the villa during the Spring and Fall Trades."

Too quiet and peaceful for Tanna's mind. Listening to the fourth gen tales were fun. Traveling and meeting new people would be an even greater adventure than staying behind and living in the past.

"I'll take the herbs to the grandmother's staying behind. Coax Naom along, and I'll meet you at the clearing." Tanna pulled her gatherboard to her back and visited the grandmothers.

Something was different. It wasn't Uden with a sponsor-less newborn in her arms. Or even Erin, instead of her now missing mother, leading the call to start the trek to Klapit.

The air didn't stir the same. Wind ruffled instead of warming. Sounds muted. People of the villa prepared for the trip slower than they ever had in her memory.

Zella waited at the clearing, ready to go.

She rushed to join her, a lump in her throat. Glad that no words were needed.

## Chapter 2

A giant eagle soared above the plains between Almond and Klapit. Or, maybe it wasn't an eagle. Almost too far off to verify.

Zella scanned the tall grass on the edges of the trail. The day's walk seemed never ending on her tired knees. Her daughter and three dogs ran through the knee-high grass as if there were no danger.

"Tanna, stop playing with the dogs. We have to reach the trade grounds cow lodge before the cows catch up. You'll step on a snake, or in prairie dog hole running without looking."

Tanna laughed. She grabbed the stick in Kol's mouth. "They have so much fun chasing sticks."

"Aren't you supposed to be learning to be gen two like Uden? You can't lead the villa to Klapit if you don't learn the way. Besides, it's too hot to play." Zella shaded her eyes from the midday sun.

Tanna scurried up to her. "You'll be leading for many seasons to come. You have another whole gen to lead."

Laughter echoed behind them. Cows mooed around the trail bend. "We have to be sure the gate is open so Erin can herd the cows in. We're already late."

"It doesn't take long to open it. Shims and Tuttle may have already be there." Tanna patted Logan's head.

"Soon you will lead, and I will fall behind with your children, if you chose to have any. It will only be a few seasons, and you will be training your replacement. Then, I can stay at the villa and rest."

"Do you miss walking in the group?" Tanna chewed a blade of grass.

Zella liked to be off alone, in front of the group. After all, she was the offering to Goddess Amber if anything went wrong.

She rested her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Up here, anything could happen. It's nice to have a companion when walking. After a generation of leading, I'm ready for someone else to take over. I wish for my grandmother's life, when we didn't travel."

"You didn't have many cows then. I don't want to lead the others. Let them take turns." Tanna pulled out her water gourd and splashed her face with as much as she drank.

Lava must never know how much she didn't want to travel. They would never understand. To the villa, the trips were the most fun season. After all, they could rest and relax, normal chores forgotten. Unlike the spiritual leaders, whose most important work, included busy ceremonies, and digging in the ancestral treasure pits, occurred then.

The outlines of the cow lodge rose before them. Tales said it had been built from the remnants of a city, whatever that was. Somehow, large rectangular rocks piled high kept the cattle, and a few watchers, safe during the trade meetings.

Barking dogs startled her.

Zella pulled herself alert and scanned for the dogs.

Tanna raced to catch up with Kol, Logan, and Naom who sounded as if they were near the cow lodge walls.

"Tanna careful! It might be a rattler!"

If Tanna heard her, she didn't slow.

Zella raced ahead to catch her.

Pushing the tall grass aside, Zella and Tanna reached the dogs. They were quiet, and circled a cradleboard-sized bundle on the ground. A grey, tattered cloth, fluttered gently in the breeze. The dogs sniffed and circled it, ears perked toward the bundle.

Zella turned away shaking. Too many people were in the five villas. Winter had been cold and damp, rotting much of their food supply. The spring had been dry, and gardens hadn't grown well. Without food, they couldn't feed their growing population.

Someone must have left behind an infant last fall. Maybe someone in the Almond villa had given up a child to Amber's care. Tuttle villa had left for home sooner than they had. She would know if Shims, or Lava, had lost any members. The Webbel villa, anything could be true of them.

Babbling from the bundle in the hollow broke the silence.

Tanna moved the blanket.

The infant's face appeared normal.

A warm earthy smell swept up to greet them.

Grass a few body lengths away rustled.

A small fleeing figure disappeared through the grass.

Tanna picked up the bundle and tried to hand it to Zella.

Zella crossed her arms across her chest.

She struggled to remain standing. "No. We must leave it here. We cannot take on more members. No telling why this child was abandoned. Maybe it has a deformity we can't see."

"We can't leave it. Someone left it here for us to find."

"To find, yes. We can't feed it. We don't have enough food for our own people."

"Babies this age don't eat regular food. Can't we at least carry it to the meeting at Klapit? Let the five villas decide?"

Zella sighed. After the illness, the villas had all been smaller. Then, they would have fought over this child. Now, there were too many people, and not enough food. She held out her arms. "Leave the child with me. Go ask the rest of our villa to catch up. A short break from the midday sun will do us all good."

She dumped the baby in Zella's arms. Then she danced off in the sunlight, as it shimmered through the grasses.

Tanna would never grow up.

Zella turned back to the infant. The blanket was an unusual weave. The cradleboard was shaped almost like a Webbel cradleboard. A large round head area, too large, and it barely narrowed before the foot section flared out again.

She gasped.

A perfect baby boy stared up and babbled at her.

Zella sat down and placed the child in her lap. She rocked back and forth, crooning a wordless tune. Tears streamed down her face as she remembered another infant boy, about the same age. How could a mother give up this child? She could never have given up her boy. As the hot tears slid down her cheeks, she lifted her head and cried aloud, "Why? Why now?"

The infant babbled. Tiny hands clutched her shawl, looking for a meal.

Zella had nothing for him. Someone else would have to feed the boy. At least there were three new mothers with them, and he wouldn't go hungry. The council would decide what to do with an additional child. If her were a rattler child, someone would know who the mother was.

Jorn walked up to her, and glanced at her face.

He took the child and turned to the members of the villa. "Who will feed this infant for now?"

All of the new mothers rushed forward. With three of them, they could share the new infant, and none of their babies would suffer. Of course, the villas could decide he should be placed to die as an offering to Goddess Amber.

Since he had been abandoned, he was most likely a rattler, and expected to die, to protect the community from dangers, mostly forgotten, even by the fourth gen grandmothers.

While the group adjusted belongings and chattered, Jorn sat down next to Zella. He put his arm around her. "Who do you think he belongs to?"

Zella couldn't speak through the tears. She rocked and hugged her knees.

Jorn squeezed her shoulder. "Sis, it was long ago. This is someone else's child. Your son died of the illness that struck all the villas."

She nodded, trying to keep the sobs quiet. "We already have too many members. If I take him, Tanna and I have to leave and form a new villa."

His hand stayed on her shoulder and shielded her from the group, who were busy watching the new infant. "We've all been over the limit for a season, or more. We knew it was coming. We all agreed to wait until next Fall Trade to make a decision. It will work out."

"Now we have four babies, and not the expected three."

"Amber sent us this child for a reason. She won't punish us for taking her gift. Perhaps at the trade meetings, some new mother needs a child to replace one. Disease or disaster may have befallen another villa. Come now, we need to go on." He patted her shoulder, and looked into her eyes.

She nodded, wiped her eyes, and stood up. "Tanna, come."

Almond villa hadn't been ready to leave when they passed. They hadn't visited and gathered news. Perhaps they should have waited. The Almond villa might know something about the infant boy.

Erin and a few of the women herded the cows and sheep into the cow lodge. The cows rushed into the lush pasture that had grown deep and full all summer long. When they began the long



trek home, it would be cropped short, and dirt would blow loosely across the ground.

The brush-covered entrance was only a few body lengths away from where the baby had been placed. If someone hadn't been ahead of the herd, the herd might have stampeded across him.

The thirty-five members of the Lava villa who had come on the journey, milled around chatting, waiting on leadership.

Tanna was nowhere in sight.

Zella would lead them on to Klapit. She stood to walk ahead of the group along the path.

Erin would stay behind with the cows and sheep, and wait for the other villas to arrive with their herds.

Tanna raced back to Zella. Three prairie dogs dangled from her hands.

She smiled. Her daughter could outrun anyone in the villa. She had trained Kol, Logan, and Naom to catch prairie dogs for them. There were never enough.

Zella added them to her gatherboard, along with the grains she gathered walking through the tall grass. They should reach Klapit, and their campsite, by nightfall.

A deep rumbling interrupted her thoughts. She squatted down and placed her hands and right ear on the ground. Of only three options, two would bring food. One would bring death and devastation. The rumbling intensified.

She smiled.

Tanna and the dogs raced to her side.

Lava hunters bounded next to them, spears at the ready.

Zella pointed northwards where the sound originated.

There were only five hunters, so they could only kill one or two bison, or maybe three horses, if they were the smaller ones. Large animal hunts occurred while all the villas gathered at Klapit, and she had never been able to attend.

The ground shook as the bison came into view. Grass waved and bent as the tall bison thundered past.

Zella remained calm.

The ground shook from the pounding hooves. Dirt and grass flew high in the air.

The bison stampede seemed to last longer than imaginable. She stood tall, and breathed in the musky odor. Wind created by the bison swayed like the grasses around her. Her heart pounded at being so close to a live animal with so much raw power. Sweat poured off her, as the animals pounded the ground in front of her.

Zella shouted at the hunters, three men, and two women, to hurry and spear the bison before they all got away. The wind whipped the words out of her mouth. She raised her arms to warn them the herd was escaping, and nearly fell.

The thundering slowed, and passed. A last few bison struggled by, limping and bellowing to their herd.

The hunters tightened their grip on their spears and jumped forward. Animal screams cut short. The hunters bellowed.

The bison squealed in the panic of their bloody death throes. Spears stuck out of three dying bison. They thrashed. Blood splattered the grass and hunters.

Zella closed her eyes. A hunt was worse than watching someone die. The screams reminded her of the wounds the hunter had suffered and died from. Tanna's sponsor had been a hunter. He had died in her arms from the attack of a lion hunting the same bison herd as the hunters many seasons before.

The people of Lava villa caught up, and set up camp to butcher the animals.

Zella had no idea what to do to help. She relied on her foraging skills for food for her and Tanna. Everyone shared food from hunts. A hunt during the walk had happened once before, when she was little more than a toddler. She grabbed Tanna and held her close.

Tanna shook free, and ran to grab the infant they had found, and another baby. "Zella, come help! You can hold babies."

She tried to move, and had trouble walking forward. Her knees wobbled, or perhaps the ground shook, as Goddess Amber spoke her disapproval of rescuing the infant boy. She sat down.

Tanna handed her the two infants.

One of the young mothers rushed to her with the other two infants and set up a portable stick covered cloth panel, so the babies wouldn't remain in direct sunshine.

Jorn directed the butchering process. Once everyone was doing their job, he walked over to her. "Guess we will camp here tonight."

"We did the right thing, I think." Zella nodded.

He sat cross-legged and watched her. "Good." Jorn gazed at the group huddled around the three carcasses. "Maybe we should send Tanna on ahead? Webbel may want to have a good hunt tomorrow, while the bison are nearby."

"I don't like the idea of sending her so far by herself. What stampeded them?"

"I'm not sure. No lions in sight. How far are we?"

"Close enough they may have felt the ground shake."

He watched the rest of the people. "It may seem we are hogging the animals we were given."

"Jorn, please. I'll go."

"Tanna is faster. You stay here with the babies. Let her take two of the dogs and her spear." He stood and hurried to help with the butchering of the bison.

Tanna stepped under the shade. "I heard. I better mind uncle."

Zella reached out to grab Tanna. "Wait. Be sure you have water and food. Take care of yourself. Be careful of rattlers! Take three dogs, your best." Zella's stomach lurched as Tanna pulled away.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry. You already said I need to act gen two. You were leading when you were my age. And anyway, I can be there quickly!" She pulled away.

"I led surrounded by dogs. Not on my own!"

Tanna raced down the overgrown trail with Logan, Kol, and Naom at her heels.

Zella busied herself with infants. Tanna should be fine. One baby began to cry. Was it Jana, Janel, or Corandra? She couldn't remember. In fact, she had so lost contact with the villa; she couldn't remember which infant belonged to which mother. She remembered each birth, and each infant's face, though she couldn't match them with their mother.

Uden walked up.

One baby cried and reached for her.

"Poor Corandra. I'll feed her. Mother Zella, do you have any food to provide?" Uden took the crying infant.

I'm not a grandmother. The whole villa must see me as failing now.

The prairie dogs her daughter had caught and the grains she had gathered were in the basket at her side. "Sure, here is my basket. Do I need to stay way back here?"

"Probably a good idea with the infants. If they were older, they could watch and learn. They're all so young."

Uden fed the baby and cooed to her.

Rest felt good.

To see this younger girl with a baby of her own, calm and relaxed in the mother role surprised her. She couldn't picture Tanna ever settling down. "You are the same age as my daughter."

"Younger. Tanna taught me to walk by grabbing my hands and trying to run with me."

Zella laughed. Tanna had once dragged Uden through a puddle. Uden slipped, and fell into a hidden fiery anthill. "I hope Tanna stays safe."

"She will. Goddess Amber is with her today. She will lead us to something new, something we all need." Her eyes stared off in the distance, her face masked. A look of pain of some sort had blinked across the mask. Corandra's birth had been normal, though Uden had pushed the infant away at first glance.

Zella watched her closer.

Uden fed her baby without ever looking at her face. She laid her baby down beside the other three, and caressed each forehead as she rocked forward to stand.

"You'll be fine, Mother Zella?" Uden asked.

Zella nodded. A tear slipped down her cheek.

Uden ran back to the group butchering the animals.

With four tiny infants, Zella had never felt so alone. Not even when leading the villa with Tanna as an infant on her back.

Lava villa accepted her. She had been born to the villa.

Something had always been missing.

Her eyes rested on the new infant's cradleboard. It wasn't Webbel. Nor, did it belong to Almond, Tuttle, Shims, or Lava.

The boy didn't stir.

Corandra kicked and cooed, grabbing at a loose string on her new cradleboard. The middle curves were muddy, and a long splinter poked out. The head curve had split on one side.

Zella's heart skipped and danced.

Uden hadn't kept the cradleboard repaired. Who was Corandra's sponsor? She touched Corandra's cheek, and soothed her back to sleep. The new infant didn't wake. His cradleboard was perfect. As if crafted only days before. Who might this child be, and why had he been left in their path?

## Chapter 3

Breathing and running felt the same to Tanna, a natural part of life. Her three favorite dogs, Logan, Naom, and Kol raced beside her. She checked to be sure they stayed with her, and didn't fall behind, or wander off. When their tongues began to hang too low, she gave them some water.

Tanna paused at a trail marker rock. A noise other than the baking wind whistled through the grass.

The dogs panted, glad for the rest after the morning's long walk.

Robin walked out of the brush from the direction of the northern entrance to the cow lodge. "Good to see you Tanna. My sponsor is nearby." He exaggerated looking all around.

"Your mom and the rest of Lava are with you?"

Tanna laughed. "The good news is a herd of bison are back that way." She pointed behind her. "Almond will catch up with our group soon. Is Tuttle behind you?"

Robin nodded. "A quarter day march, or Vira and Nala would be with me and Dover."

"Hopefully we won't meet Orid." She shivered in the warm sunshine.

"Zella let you run on ahead." Robin joined her on the rock.

"She didn't. Uncle Jorn wanted me to find Tuttle and Webbel to invite them to the hunt."

Dover stepped through the brush. "We have to be fair."

"I'd rather not invite Webbel," Tanna said.

"Perhaps we should wait and see what Quan and Irvin want to do. No point in going on, only to turn back."

Tanna glanced at Robin's face.

His furrowed brow shared her feelings.

"Maybe you can go for us? Blake will listen to you."

Dover stared at her and petted Naom. "And they sent you instead of Zella because?"

"I can't sit still." Tanna lowered her head.

"Normal for your age." Dover laughed and leaned back to look up at the sky. "The best way to be. Quan is concerned about Webbel too. I think I'll let you two hawk eyes go on, if you promise to be careful, and come straight back here."

Logan nuzzled her hand.

"Shouldn't our four villas be enough people?"

"We can never be sure." Dover paused.

"You're too young to remember." Dover closed his eyes, shook his head, and wrapped his hands around his knees. "Hurry on ahead, both of you. Be quiet and careful."

Robin took her hand. "Come on. If we hurry, we can be back before nightfall!"

He took off, half dragging her with him as they fled through the grasses. They shouldn't be far from Klapit. Maybe a short run at this speed.

Soon they found a line of bent grass that stretched as far as they could see in either direction. They paused for a drink of water. "Something is odd here," Robin whispered. He pointed at unusual tracks in the path.

Tanna leaned forward from watering her dogs and examined the tracks more closely. A villa of people could not leave the grasses crushed that deeply, or so even.

It didn't look right, or natural. "Let's be really careful, and quiet. In fact, let's make our own path, so no one can see us." She hurried back into the cover of the tall grass. Soon they were walking fast, no longer running, in the direction the path followed.

At last, they peeked through the grass into Klapit clearing.

Tanna gasped at the mess. She covered her mouth with her hand and backed up.

Robin's toes wiggled under her foot.

She turned to him, and he pulled her even further back.

To remain invisible, they walked further from the main path. They crouched down and peeked through the tall grass at the dig area. Tall things, like trees without limbs or leaves, were on the ground. Flat items, like walls, slid across the ground. Things they had never seen before, or imagined. People, mostly third gen adult men, ran like ants, scurrying into pits, and while others scrambled out, under heavy loads.

Tanna could not remember seeing any of the dozens of people; more than two villas worth of adult men. No women or children visible anywhere.

It was like a memory of the tales the ancestors had warned them of. Secrets, hurts, and separation in way that was wrong. Community death would follow. Goddess Amber would be angered. She might awaken the Mad Gods and shake the land once again.

Robin's face paled. He grabbed her arm, and they walked carefully back, close to the trail they had followed before.

He glanced up and down their thin trail. He silently alerted the dogs with a hand hunt signal. Robin grabbed her hand, and hurried off at a trot down a new, parallel trail.

When they reached the place they had originally picked up the Webbel trail, he barely paused. Sounds carried down the trail. Only, they weren't voices, or people walking. It was a clomping sound.

Robin ran as fast as he could through the grass.

Tanna and the dogs had difficulty keeping up.

At last, they all collapsed out of breath.

"We must hurry. They are fresher than we are, and can catch us," Robin whispered. He swallowed some water.

Tanna tried to drink, and couldn't help shuddering when she thought of Orid, and his attentions last fall. She didn't like him before. After that, the sight of him made her sick. Why all the other girls in his villa were attracted to him, she couldn't understand. Neither Orid, nor the young women of his villa had been at Klapit.

Robin grabbed her hand, and they ran again.

They reached the trail where she had met him earlier in the day. Night fast approached. There was no sign of clouds in the sky. The stars would give them some light, though maybe not enough to know if anyone followed.

Robin checked the signs. He picked up a red painted twig, barely a finger long. "Come on, they went this way." Robin grabbed her arm, glancing around only long enough to make sure the dogs were with them, and on full alert.

At last, they heard soft singing. The odor of fire pits wafted along the breeze. The villas had created a camping spot for the night, and waited on them.

Dogs barked as they approached.

Tanna breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into the clearing.

Zella cried and held onto Dover's arm. What could be wrong?



With a new burst of energy, Zella ran to her. Hugging her, Tanna collapsed.

"Food, water, quick!" Dover said.

She didn't remember much for a while.

A fire pit flickered. Darkness loomed, with only a point of light.

Robin held her hand.

Logan, Kol, and Naom panted at her feet.

Dover and Zella were nearby talking with the leaders from all four villas.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

Uden walked up and placed the unknown infant boy in her arms.

This child could be anyone's child. Orid's face flashed in front of her. She shuddered.

"Tanna," Dover said, "Please tell us what you and Robin saw."

She turned to Robin.

"I already told them," he said. "They need you to confirm it."

There was no easy way to describe the unusual tracks in the grass, and the odd trees. Third gen adults didn't usually run around. Running in the summer sun could be deadly for anyone. Being young, she could run in it better than those men could. As long as she stayed in the shade of the grass, and not in the clearings. She had never been sun sick, though she and Zella had treated many adults for sun sickness.

Zella reached for her hand.

Tanna wouldn't let the baby go. The cradleboard was almost like a Webbel one. The mother must have been unable to shave it correctly. Maybe the deformed cradleboard was to protect it when she no longer could. This child was unwanted by its mother. His sponsor might even be Orid.

She held the baby close, staring deep into his eyes, wishing she could read in them the tale of his birth. She feared Orid. She didn't fear this boy, yet. Glancing up at Zella, a tear slid down her cheek. This child could be a child born of an attack. A rattler, one who was expected to die.

Tanna held him closer, brushing her cheek against his.

## Chapter 4

A chill tickled down Zella's spine as Tanna related her adventure.

Jorn paced the fire lit area, almost running off at one point.

The leaders had suspected something for a while. At last Fall Trade, Blake had made some strange remarks, and kept hunters watching the west side of Klapit. He also had told them not to fill in their dig pits. Blake claimed he'd send hunters back to catch animals that fell in the trapped pits, and would share with the other villas. No runners, or captured food, had arrived at Lava or Shims villas.

This bison hunt might be a trap. Or was it Goddess Amber sending them a chance to talk alone and plan for their own protection?

Some new emotion shone in Tanna's eyes. What it was, she wasn't sure. The way she held the infant close to her, that spoke volumes too. Staring into his big brown eyes, Tanna rocked him to sleep on her lap. She was gen two now, ready for a child of her own, if she wanted one.

Her heart ached. Zella longed to keep the infant as hers. The boy, who hadn't lived, could live again in this young infant.

"I think we leaders need to talk, without the children," Jorn said.

"Don't exclude me, or Robin. We are adults now too. If Zella expects me to lead next fall, I need to know what is going on." Tanna clutched the infant closer.

Zella's face felt hot.

Jorn turned to her.

"Yes," she whispered.

"They need to be included," Dover said.

"Okay." Jorn shrugged. "Quan, bring the people close together. Tell them to sing and tell tales. We must be guarded by them not knowing our conversation. No one is to interrupt our council. Come."

Jorn stalked off to the tent in the middle of the camp.

Zella held out her hand to Tanna. Too late.

Robin was already helping Tanna up.

Zella smiled. Maybe they wouldn't make the same mistake she had. They would make a good match.

The noise around the fire intensified.

Zella stepped inside the tent to relative peace and quiet. She settled beside her daughter.

The four villas observed the normal seating arrangement. This left the fifth point, closest to the entry in the star circle, open for the missing villa. No one was here to represent it. Zella with Tanna and Jorn sat to the right of the entry. Dover with Robin and Quan sat to the left in Shims position. This left Varl with daughter Sharel and leader Marin of the Almond villa, and Vira with daughter Nala, and Tuttle leader Irvin facing the entry.

Tanna placed the baby in the empty space, between Jorn and Quan, to represent the missing villa.

"You have all heard what these young adults have to say. Secrets have been kept from the leaders, and the people. Overpopulation already threatens the anger of the Goddess. Secrets could awaken her wrath." Jorn said.

All were quiet.

"The Lava villa agrees this is a dangerous situation." Jorn said.

Zella placed her hands holding her tiny rectangular shaped ancestral object in the circle. It was said to contain the words of the Goddess Amber.

"The Shim villa agrees?"

Quan placed his hands holding the thumb length, cylinder shaped ancestral object inside the circle. Tales proclaimed this object to give power to the user.

"The Almond Villa?"

"What does this mean for us?" Marin held out her hands showing the metal slingshot shaped ancestral object. It made a vibrating sound when struck with stone.

"Tuttle villa?"

Irvin reached forward, touching Marin's hand with a long thin, bendable ancestral object. This piece, like so many others from the mines would break. A brightly colored outside that bent, and a brittle inside that crumbled to dust.

"Roamers have increased. Bears or cats have been blamed for damage during the trade travels, when maybe it wasn't them." Quan held his hands in the speaking space.

"We are small in number, with only one hundred and forty people, two-thirds of whom are adults. It isn't many, even if we think it is. This area once supported far more people. We have no idea how, or why," Jorn said.

"Dover went a few months ago on a scouting mission. Perhaps he can tell us what he saw?" Quan said.

"I saw people. Far more than ancient custom says can safely survive here. I am not talking about a few over in each villa as we figure out how to redistribute people into already full villas. Or, decide who leaves to form a new villa away from their friends and family. It looked like double a multi-villa trade meeting already in progress." Dover leaned back, a faraway look on his face.

There was no way one person could remember so many names and faces. Zella couldn't imagine why anyone would want to be part of such a large group. Even when the five villas joined for the trades, there were many she could not remember.

Marin held her trembling hands in the speaking space. "How many do you think?"

"Some of the conversations I overheard made it clear there were more, many more, somewhere near," Dover said.

Zella didn't know, or care, who whistled. They probably all did. That was a lot of people. This could anger the Mad Gods. Waking them up could bring disease and devastation.

"Breaking the ancient laws will lead all of us to danger." Tanna said.

Jorn smiled. Everyone knew he spoiled his niece. For her to speak what was on all of their minds, helped them save face.

"That is why we are here tonight instead of Klapit."

"They will be wondering where we are, since we're all here." Tanna tucked the blanket under the infant.

"Maybe not. Let's hope they don't expect us for another day. I think from what you and Robin saw, they don't expect us tonight. They were rushing to cover up whatever they were doing."

The pile of ancestral tools lay in the center of the speaking paces. Until one was removed, the conversation would continue. Of

course, the Webbel spearhead wasn't there. Goddess Amber might not hear them speak. Whether that was good, or bad, remained unknown.

Tanna reached out and touched the pieces.

Tales of the fourth gen grandmothers said the tools would bring them hope and peace one day. As long as the pieces lasted, so would their community. Goddess Amber had given them these tools as reminders of a civilization that came to ruin.

Perhaps Tanna would unlock whatever Goddess Amber had planned for their future.

Zella touched Tanna's arm. "We don't know the full meaning of the ancestor's objects. We pass them down, hoping to find the knowledge hidden for more gens than can be remembered. Maybe someday, these items will bring us to a future where we can visit and live as our ancestors did."

Jorn leaned forward. "Without their downfall. All we know, is they fell from the grace of Amber, and lost everything. Some generations we want to know more, and search for more mines. Some generations have chosen not to want to know their past, and dig less. It's difficult to say what is best."

Tanna's face was unreadable as she stared at Robin.

"What the Webbel toolmakers have done could easily anger the Goddess Amber and cause the awakening of the Mad Gods. The land could quake again. Water could appear where none was before. Mountains could fall." Jorn said.

Quan leaned forward. "We could have joined them, if they had included us. However, they have hidden their ways from us. They have lied."

"Secrets," Irvin said. "Not really lies."

Quan turned to Irvin. "Secrets and lies are twins. While we are not as open with the children as perhaps we should have been, we can see the error in our ways."

"We don't know enough," Zella said. "We must prepare to meet them tomorrow, and see what they are doing. If Webbel hasn't hidden everything from view."

"I doubt they could hide those odd tracks," Tanna said. "Where were the women and children?"

All they could do was guess what would happen, and what the Webbel villa might have done. After a long talk, the situation came down to wait and see. Be prepared for anything.

"Tomorrow will be a long, difficult day," Jorn said. "Leaders, verify that your entire villa is here. Let me know if you see anyone who doesn't belong to your villa." He picked up the Lava ancestral object.

Tanna picked up the dozing infant and hurried out of the tent.

Ah, to be too old, or too young, to understand. Zella would rather be too old. She wasn't sure the upcoming changes were ones she wanted to live through. There was no living memory of fighting between villas. There were chilling bloody battle tales of the ancestors. Not something she wanted to see, or be a part of.

Slipping outside last, Zella searched for Tanna. Her voice spoke not far away in the crowd. Tales circulated. People knew something potentially bad was coming. Out here in the Grass Sea, there was nothing. No materials and no knowledge, to make weapons to protect themselves if they needed too. Webbel had given them only the bare essential tools, none strong enough to be reliable protection.

Of course, there were the bison bones. With the right knowledge, they could be shaped into quality tools. She hurried to the place where they had been piled after butchering. Normally, the children would carry them to Klapit for the Webbels to create tools for the next trade meeting. She grabbed a pelvic bone. It would make a good plate, and the hooves would be used in ceremonies.

Survival might be more important than dishes.

Zella had never used an unaltered bone as a weapon. She picked up a leg bone.

A noise startled her from behind.

She clutched the bone.

The grass rustled behind her. Although small creatures generally avoided where people were, it could be a rattlesnake. The grasses beyond the edge of firelight rippled again.

Leg bone raised above her head, she stepped forward.

She reached out and grabbed a bundle of material on the ground.

An unrecognized girl slid out.

Zella's whistle shrilled through the night.

The girl didn't struggle. She put her hands over her ears and hid her face.

Jorn arrived first.

Looking first at Zella, then at the child, he reached out his hand. "Child, are you alone?"

She nodded and motioned a sign.

Zella grabbed Jorn's arm.

The child put her arms together and rocked them.

"Can you speak?" Zella said.

The people of the villas crowded around them.

Jorn turned back to them. "Let's all follow Zella's example, at least in part. Everyone who doesn't carry a spear, or a bow and arrow, please grab a bison bone to keep with you. It may come in handy. Now back to camp. We start early tomorrow."

Jorn picked the little girl up. He carried her through the group, and into the tent.

Tanna ran up with Robin and the baby.

As they entered the tent, the child saw the baby and squealed.

The flap closed behind Tanna, and the girl ran to the baby. She touched a tiny leg then turned to Jorn and Zella. "My brother." Her words were thick, as if her tongue were swollen.

"Sit," Zella said. "Tell us your tale."

The girl went to the middle of the circle, and sat down hugging her shoulders.

Robin found a piece of horsehide to wrap around her thin arms.

She smiled at him.

"I don't understand everything mom said. I'm Rusty. Brother had no name. Mama came from old Shells. Don't know where that is." Rusty gazed around the group.

Shells? Zella took a deep breath. She had heard Shells mentioned, and thought it was an abandoned place, where seashells were gathered.

"Pater came from Mills. He brought something with him to the Webbel people. The Webbels had invited my mom's people to come live near them."

The horsehide shawl slipped off her shoulders.

Who was Pater? Zella pulled the shawl back up and tucked it in around Rusty's arms.

"Pater went back to Mills for something, I don't know what. The funny looking man came back and said he died there. Brother was born soon after. And Mama didn't want the Webbels to know about him. She sent me to find someone named Zella."

Tanna covered her mouth with her hand.

"I heard you and Tanna talking, and figured I had the right people. I liked you anyway. Better than those Webbel people. Even the men with you seem nice."

The child's frown became a smile.

"After giving you the baby, I hid. I followed behind the group. A few kids saw me. I was careful to cover my tracks."

"Not too careful, or you wouldn't have been caught tonight," Jorn said.

"I couldn't leave my brother without being sure he was safe. I was going to find him, when she scared me."

Zella smiled. This child, maybe seven, treated her as an equal. Then again, maybe she was an equal. After all, at seven, Zella would hardly have walked across the plains with a baby and no protection. The lions would have had her for lunch. She shivered at the thought.

"Rusty, what can you tell us about the Webbels and old Shells? What is life like there?" Jorn shifted his weight, glancing between the child and Zella.

"Well, it's always busy. We rest when the other groups come to visit. The men are always bothering mama. Recently, they chase me too. I don't like them."

Zella shuddered again, and noticed Tanna did the same. "Child, where is your mom?"

Tears glistened on her cheeks. "She said she was going back to old Shells. I don't think so though. They burned it." Rusty sniffled. "She was too weak. She watched me leave. Then, the men came, and attacked her again. I waited, crying softly. If they found me, they would hurt me too. When they left, mom didn't move. I had to leave. So, I wiped my tears and walked." Her hand went to her cheek.

"At least it wasn't far." Tanna handed the baby to Rusty.



She wiped her eyes, and took the infant. "No, it wasn't bad. The birds came with me. A wolf followed along. That's how I knew I was close. The barking dogs chased it off."

A wolf could be a friend, or a dangerous warning. Wolves rarely travelled alone; maybe it was a wild dog. Blake had evicted a few last Spring Trade. Zella sniffed the baby's blanket. No smell of wolf or dog.

"Zella you take Rusty, and the baby with you. Let Tanna name the infant," Jorn said.

She held out her hand to the girl. The last thing they needed was to increase by two, and anger the Goddess more. For one night.

The camp quieted as they walked through. Her sleeping place was surrounded by their dogs. They were sleeping well, not agitated. They wiggled as she and Tanna moved them to make room to sleep.

Rusty took the blanket Robin had given her, and leaned up against Kol.

He stirred, licked her head, and went back to sleep.

Zella sighed. Kol accepted Rusty. Maybe they were used to accepting anyone who arrived with Zella. The child may be a lion hidden in their midst.

"Kol smells the baby even more strongly on her. How sweet." Tanna snuggled up to Rusty to help her stay warm in the cool night air.

Zella used to hold Tanna that way, not so long ago. Her hands trembled as she pulled her horsehide blankets over her. It might not be long before she stayed behind on trips. To stay and mind the summer gardens, and the youngest toddlers. Long walks in the brushy trees. Waiting on the vegetables to grow was another matter. As was keeping the rabbits from eating the tender shoots.

## Chapter 5

Tanna woke early, uneasy. She couldn't remember why. An arm sprawled across her chest.

Panicking, she reached out to push it away, and then realized it was Robin.

She smiled. After the camp had settled down, he had snuck to her side to keep guard, in case any of the Webbels arrived looking for Rusty.

She gently moved his arm and rolled over.

He stirred only a little. The infant, and Rusty, were both fast asleep beside her. Zella's place was empty. Logan, Kol, and Noam guarded, lazily half-asleep, tongues lolling, alert for noises in the pre-dawn.

Tanna stood up carefully, calling gently to Kol. "Come Kol, I need to go, surely you do to."

Kol held his head to one side, yawned at Tanna, and stretched.

They walked through the camp to the used water grounds. Voices murmured near the tent.

Uden slept nearby. Perhaps it was her daughter cooing in the night.

Creeping to the side of the tent, she listened.

"It isn't safe," Zella said.

"And it isn't safe for them to go on. They might have been seen," Dover said.

Panic in Zella's voice caused it to lower and cut out. "No. I don't want to send her back. Not by herself."

"She won't go alone. Send her with Robin, Rusty, and the baby. If those two do go back, someone will recognize them for sure, especially Rusty. Then all of us, particularly you and Tanna, will be in serious danger."

Zella's muffled cries leaked through the tent fabric. "My only child. I can't let her go alone. The villas will protect her."

"There is no easy answer." Jorn said. "Let her go. We need her there. Plus, we have no idea what Rusty does, or doesn't know."

More sobs filled the pause.

"I don't want to scare you. We need Webbel to think Rusty is dead. When she wakes up, tell Rusty she must change her clothes to change her allegiance. Oh, and cut her hair off too."

"During the night, I saw people watching this direction. They know we are coming today," Dover said.

"Did you run all the way there?" Zella said between snuffles.

"Only part way. It seems the path they have built is used frequently. I needed to see what Robin and Tanna saw. So as soon as he left to join you and Tanna, I hurried to see the pathway they found."

"Quickly, they must go. Before the camp wakes," Jorn said. "It will be daylight soon."

Tanna jumped up and hurried on her way. She wasn't gone long. Returning another way, she arrived before Zella, and her sleeping mat hadn't chilled.

Zella walked into the circle and woke Robin. "Oh Tanna, there you are. Hurry, and grab your things. Uden will be here soon."

Tanna grabbed her gatherboard. She gently picked up the baby to see how he was this morning.

Uden walked sleepily up, carrying her daughter. "Here, let me have him."

"Who will feed him on the trip?" Tanna said before she realized Zella hadn't told her. She covered her mouth.

Her mom sat down, almost touching Rusty.

"I'm going too." At Zella and Tanna's startled look. Uden looked at them. "Zella, I don't know what is going on. And I don't care. This baby needs food, and I can give it. Besides, I'm scared. I'd rather not see the Webbels at Klapit with my own baby right now." She trued to the embers in the fire pit.

Tanna reached out to comfort her.

"How long?" Zella said.

"My gatherboard is ready. Have Rusty ready."

Zella tapped Rusty's shoulders. "Come, now."

"Wait," Uden whispered. "Tanna you take this extra shawl for her. Let her dress in it now."

Uden must have heard through the tent as Tanna had. Tanna hoped no one else heard, or forgot it if they did. She grabbed her

gatherboard and spear, and reached for the shawl. It would be a long walk.

Zella took Rusty's outfit.

Tanna handed the girl an oversized outfit.

After Rusty changed, Tanna covered her in Uden's shawl.

Robin, with his gatherboard and spear, followed speaking softly to Zella.

Rusty stumbled along beside her in the predawn chill.

They reached the remains of the bison hunt bone pile.

Zella pulled out Rusty's old outfit.

"I can't do it. I don't want to," Zella said.

"Hush." Robin walked up to Rusty and whispered to her.

She sat and placed her long hair over a boulder.

Robin chopped off her hair, piled it on top of her clothes. He pointed away back down the trail towards Almond.

He threw a bloody piece of fresh bison meat on the pile, and grabbed a leg bone. Robin waved them away.

Robin pounded the bison meat and clothes. That sound sent shivers racing up and down Tanna's spine.

Tanna followed behind Zella and Rusty into the Grass Sea.

With her hands over her ears, Rusty stumbled along.

They walked east, towards Almond. The sun would rise as they began the long journey back to the winter camps. They stopped to wait for Robin out of site of the camp and hunting area.

Robin joined them, and sat down, breathing hard. "Good Rusty. Good pretend."

"Dover wouldn't tell me why." Zella said.

Robin tousled what was left of Rusty's hair. "Someone might be watching, even if the dogs think of them as safe."

"The dogs accept almost everyone," Tanna said.

"Now, hurry back Zella, and send Uden and the babies to join us."

"Do you think someone was watching and knew you whispered to her?" Tanna said.

"She understood, thankfully. I don't think anyone was close enough to hear, I didn't want to take any chances."

Tanna's thoughts drifted to the infant. He had to have a name. She couldn't focus on that now, though. "Robin, how do you know

so much that they are doing? Our villa retains the ancestor's tales and knowledge. Does your villa keep secrets too?"

"Only medical facts that others might not remember. We'd gladly share them if someone asked."

The grass rustled behind them. Tanna reached for her bone club.

Uden stepped through with both babies. "Zella didn't dare come again. Too many tracks. Here, take the unnamed, and some food. We must be gone quickly."

Tanna reached for the infant.

Rusty took the food.

Logan and Kol rushed up to her.

Tanna strode off along the trail. Dawn sneaked above the horizon. Juggling infants and gatherboards, it would be nearly midday before they reached Almond. She wasn't sure if they would stay there, or go on to Lava. Neither Zella, or Jorn had been clear.

Camels, horses, bison, or even prairie dog holes could slow them down even more. Every sound made them jump. The dogs kept close. They trotted off every now and then to investigate clearings, and prairie dog towns. They never ventured far ahead, or behind. Their tails wagged continuously, never stiff and alert.

The first march led them past the cow lodge. They turned slightly north, to avoid the main path leading to Almond. A gentle breeze blew the tops of the Grass Sea.

Tanna rested.

Uden took turns feeding Corandra and the infant boy.

Kol and Logan stretched out beside her, tongues lolling. They jumped up, on full alert, and stared ahead.

Tanna grabbed her bison bone and held it close as her heart beat faster and louder in her chest.

## Chapter 6

Zella walked by the bone pile.

Mice already scrambled over the heap of tattered, bloody rags. The scattered remnants of the bison hunt clattered as small creatures slipped and slid away. The present sounds and sights, as well as fear of the infant, pulled her emotions taut. She had always been strong, never breaking, never letting the past sneak through to the present. To send her daughter off alone into the unknown was more than she could stand. The boy child who could belong to anyone. As much as she wanted to push him away, she also wanted to keep him for herself.

Tears streamed down Zella's hand covered cheeks.

Weight landed on her shoulder.

"Come. It will all be better soon. We will find a way. Our ancestors did." Jorn touched her hand.

Zella sighed. "They had turmoil many generations before peace came back, for us, their descendants. I have always lived in peace. Our mom went searching for the mountains that we've never seen, to find something, and she never came back."

Jorn squatted beside her, holding her arm.

The sun peeked over the horizon.

An odor of flesh residue on the bones beside her, wafted upward.

"They had to wait for peace, because they were afraid of it. They didn't know peace. Like us, they wanted life to stay as they knew it, only better."

Zella wiped away her tears. "I know. I miss my daughter right now, and the unknown boy she took with her. I don't want them to die. I want to grow old and die first, as it should be."

"I know you do. We need you. Tanna needs you strong, and not to let anyone know you are worried too much. Confident, and cautious, as you've always been. We fear far more than they can understand right now. I fear we will all find out together exactly how serious the situation is. We have a short walk today to Klapit. I want you, Dover, Varl, and Vira to go together in front. If there is a problem, send Vira and Varl back immediately."

Zella squared her shoulders, and walked back to her sleeping area. Her belongings wouldn't take long to gather. One of Tanna's dogs, Naom, had stayed behind. She would be good company.

Dover brought Varl and Vira to where she was waiting. Klapit wasn't far off to the west. The four of them could have made it there quickly. However, with all the families, dogs, baggage, infants, and the not so young, it could be midday before they were all fed, and managed the short walk. Especially, with all the chatter and reunions of friends and siblings. A hard knot formed in her stomach as her fear of the unknown increased.

The people of the four villas stayed behind them, leaders and hunters around the edges as guards. Jorn and Quan tried to remind the people to be quiet, though what reason they had given, Zella didn't know. Heavy bison meat dripped with residual blood and needed to be hung soon so it could dry. Then, soaked clothing and covers would have to be washed. There had been no singing, or laughter, as the people left camp, though they were glad to be carrying food. They might be able to stay and enjoy the mining experience, if the group leaders decided not to hold another bison hunt.

Mid-morning approached, as did the rise in land that marked the slight turn to their usual entry to Klapit. When they reached the end of the path, Jorn directed the villas to sit quietly in the tall grass.

Dover walked on ahead. He parted the grasses carefully, and glanced through. Waving the dig leaders forward, he strode out into the clearing.

Zella waved Naom to sit, and caught up with Dover. Varl and Vira followed cautiously behind her.

Everything appeared normal, on the surface. A quick glance at the ground revealed little, though she didn't dare look closely for changes. Further out were the odd, regular indentions Tanna had mentioned. Long indented rows, as if logs had laid there for days.

Dover bumped her arm as six strong men approached.

She almost jumped. Not good to be caught staring at the changes.

Zella didn't recognize the welcoming committee. She should, even if she didn't remember their names. A sound, not quite a gasp,

and not a whimper came from behind her. Either Vira, or Varl, agreed with her, and they were far more social than she was.

One man walked ahead of the group holding out his arms, "So many at once. I thought the villas only sent one or two ahead."

"Normally, yes," Dover said. "However, we caught up with one another yesterday. We need to speak with Blake and Calen. Are they at the dig lodge?"

The six men surrounded Dover, Zella, Varl, and Vira.

"Yes. They are waiting. Follow us." The leader opened a walkway between the welcoming committee.

As they circled around the edge of the pit mine, Zella barely glanced at it. Out of the corner of her eye, tiny abnormalities jumped out. Not good. No one was supposed to dig until all the villas arrived and made the decision on where to dig together.

The dig lodge had been built many gens before, from hard rocks previously found in the pit. It leaned to one side. The only windsun slanted a jagged line to the usually open entry. A board with the letters "kla" in red hung over the closed wooden entry. Last trade meeting, there had been talk of tearing it down. Someday, maybe they would, if it didn't fall down in a summer storm.

One man opened the entry, and ushered them into the small, dark room.

Something was different. Even the windsun cover was pulled tight. Her eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

Calen and Blake leaned in a corner. They were obviously discussing something, almost wordlessly.

The floor had been swept clean, instead of covered in piles of dust, leaves, and animal tracks. A small line faded in and out of the dirt floor.

The two men didn't acknowledge them as they walked in.

Calen gestured widely, paler than Blake. "Grubs," he mumbled.

She wasn't sure what he meant. Calen's tone of voice sent a shiver down her spine.

Blake stood calmly, his arms crossed. He glanced up, at the group in front of him. "Well, hello there. You are late this season. What happened? Sorry we have to meet in here. The sun simply doesn't agree with me."



Something unusual for a leader to say. Webbel leaders shouldn't have been here ahead of the rest of the villas. Their villa, a day's walk south, should have caught up with them in the night, if they had been arriving as expected. Roamers should never have been admitted to the dig location without full approval of all of the villas.

Dover took the lead from her however, stepping almost in front of her by doing so.

"The Lava villa was walking when the bison herd came. They were able to kill three. They waited for the rest of us to catch up to spilt up the meat. We did bring a share for your villa as well."

Calen relaxed and listened, watching Dover closely.

"Our villas will be here soon; they will be ready to set up the meat drying racks. Then, as a group, we must decide if we will have another bison hunt before we go to our summer fishing camps." Dover's voice did not waver.

"Oh." Blake raised an eyebrow, "So you went ahead with the bison hunt, and now you want to ask if we want to join you in another? Why should we?"

This wasn't good. Zella gulped.

Calen glanced at Blake, and back to Zella. "Normally, we would. However, we are already a day behind. Let the leaders discuss that later. We need to decide where to dig now."

Blake laughed drily. "Are you sure finding bison is the only reason you all joined to walk together?"

"Of course," Dover said. "Why else?"

"It seems a few people are missing. What, no apprentices?" Blake gazed around the little room, stopping to stare at Zella.

Zella blinked. Of course, he would ask. Jorn had solved that problem already.

"No," Dover said. "They were needed elsewhere. Sharel and Nala are with the main villas. Robin and Tanna will meet up with us later, if they can. A soon to be new mother needed their help."

"I can see I am done here. I will leave you and Calen to discuss your digging arrangements. I have work to do." Blake stared hard at each of them. Then stared the longest at Calen, before he stalked out of the dark dig lodge.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at his exit. A different tension hung in the air.

"How about we walk among the pits, and choose where to dig? I have a few suggestions. We can decide together." Calen led the way out into the sunshine.

Zella was the last to leave. Something shuffled inside the dark dig lodge. She glanced around and saw no one. Perhaps, a mouse or rat scrambled through the dust and dirt in the dark corner.

Outside in the sunlight, the people of the villas stepped through the tall grass camp boundary. Jorn was in front.

She barely glanced at them, and turned to follow Calen, Dover, Varl, and Vira.

Calen chose a section she could not remember anyone ever having excavated. That was good. The useful things were long gone throughout most of the pit. Soon, they would have to try to find another pit to dig. It might even mean a move from their winter homes. There had to be another, after all their ancestors had numbered well beyond the hundreds that were known to have inhabited this region in living memory.

"Zella, you take that section, over by the bushes. Dover, to this side. Varl, Vira, you may choose, I'll be in the middle here."

Normally, Zella would be glad for the shade. Now, she feared it could hide something, or someone, while she worked. Assigned sections were not something that had ever been done before. She walked over to her assigned segment and examined it.

Vira came up to rope off Zella's section.

Her section would be a square, three body lengths each direction. A simple design. If all went well, the ropes would be there when they came back through for Fall Trade, before heading to their winter homes.

Vira set up each dig section with the proper ceremony. After all, it wouldn't be fair if the ground, or ropes, shifted, giving one person more space than another to dig.

Zella sat down and patted the ground while she waited. Firm, though not too firm. Tomorrow after the welcome feast would be their first chance to begin digging. Searching for the secrets and tools of their ancestors, often waited on the demands of the villas.

Her shoulders dropped as Sharel ran to her sponsor Varl. The container in the girl's hands swung as if she were a toddler trying to please those around her. The youngest of the assistants, she could barely step over the ropes separating the dig sections.

Nala, only a season younger than Tanna, ran to join her mother Vira. Her container showed signs of the strange destruction that ate at the edges slowly, and eventually, it would crumble in her hands.

There had always been assistants for each dig leader. When Tanna was younger, Jorn had helped as well. If he had sponsored a girl, that child too would have been trained to be dig. Zella glanced up.

Dover watched her.

Even though she couldn't read his expression, she thought she recognized a hint of the pain and confusion she felt.

They would go help their camp set up and prepare the feast. The leaders, and Jorn, would expect them to be part of the group, and not separate. At least there was fresh bison. Dover took her arm as they walked back to the camp area. He would be beside her where he belonged.

# Chapter 7

The broken wide hard path of the ancestors stretched out in front of them. Until recently, no villa had crossed it. Tanna hoped to follow it back down to Almond without using their regular trail.

She stepped forward and peeked through the underbrush. Instead of expected dense undergrowth, it was more like the path she and Robin had encountered the day before. Grass, trees, and bushes had been cleared from the ancestor's boundary that protected the villas. She covered a gasp and backed up.

Unrecognized voices, and a strange high-pitched sound, carried down the path. Both moved faster than a normal walking speed. So fast, they had to be running. At that running speed, talking would be impossible.

Her arms waved, and eyes opened wide, afraid to speak aloud. Tanna turned and directed Robin to run. She also signed to Logan and Kol to run at her heels and cover her footprints.

Rusty ran nearest to Tanna, with Uden the furthest away.

Soon, the voices had almost reached where they were, on that parallel path.

The boy Tanna carried made a slight gurgling sound, nothing to attract a human's attention. If the babies cried, they could be caught.

Racing on, she glanced from side to side to be sure Robin and Rusty were with her. The Grass Sea hid Uden.

The voices faded away. There had been no sound of dogs. So hopefully, there had been none to smell them, or Logan and Kol. Of course, Webbel dogs would know their scent, and not send a danger signal to their caretakers. Then again, the Webbel dogs could be quiet because they were stalking them. Or, they might not even be Webbel dogs.

She couldn't run much longer in the intense midday heat.

Rusty fell behind.

With a slight sound to Robin, she veered toward Rusty. They collapsed on the ground, panting and trying to catch their breath.

Robin slid down beside them.

Uden limped towards them, Logan on one side, Kol on the other. Grass and dust covered her clothes and hair. Corandra cried softly. "I fell. You will have to go on without me."

"No way," Robin said.

"You have to."

"No Uden. Who would feed the other baby? We would never leave anyone to die!" Tanna petted Logan and Kol.

"Robin couldn't carry me far. We have over a two-month journey. And that's not even to Lava."

Robin handed Uden the water gourd. "Drink, and stay quiet. We all need to rest and be quiet."

Logan and Kol rested beside them, tongues lolling from the heat. The hair on their backs stood up straight. They stared east, in the direction of the ancestor's path. The wind blew from that direction towards them.

"Tanna and I will check it out," Robin whispered.

He took her hand, and they crawled through the underbrush, waving the dogs to wait. It was only a few body lengths of space under cover.

Camel heads peeked over the tops of the tall prairie grass. Though rarely seen, camels existed in a few small herds on the plains. Only six adult animals, and one baby appeared in this herd. Their beauty was mostly in their height, as they towered above the tallest grass. They could see most predators, and avoid them. Their appearance and attitude were less than friendly; even the wild horse herds would run from them.

One enormous camel bleated softly. She sat down and leaned to one side.

The other camels walked out of view.

After few more bleats, the heavy camel opened its mouth and breathed while shifting her hind legs.

Rusty crawled up beside them.

Legs appeared out from under the camel's tail, covered in liquid. Soon, the head and neck appeared, and slid down to the ground. Hind legs followed.

The mother turned around to sniff her baby. It made a few sounds as it tried to stand, unsteady on its wobbly, knobby legs. The baby reached up and took its first meal.

Tanna and Robin watched the new mom and baby.

Rusty kicked her heels in the grass glancing from baby camel to her baby brother.

Kol and Logan guarded Uden, Corandra, and the boy.

Grass rustled. A roar echoed across the plains.

Tanna glanced to the south.

A yellowish-brown head with a dark mane, peeked into the clearing that held the mother and newborn camel.

Uden and Rusty couldn't outrun it.

She and Robin couldn't either.

Where there was one, there might be more. They flattened further in the grass.

The lion jumped and grabbed the new mother camel in a locked embrace.

Mother camel kicked and screamed.

Baby camel backed away, unsure of what was happening. Unsteady on its feet, hind legs slipped, and it bleated.

Mother camel fell to the ground.

The lion wrestled on her back, working his jaws tighter around her neck. When the mother camel no longer struggled, he roared. He tore a mouthful of flesh from the mother camel's neck, which splattered bright red blood all over the brown grass.

The other camels were long gone.

Except one.

The dead mother's newborn waited and called, as the lion devoured her.

The lion's mane was small, so he must not have won a territory. If they waited, and they didn't have much choice, maybe they could catch a little fresh meat.

Morning crept by as they lay on the grass. They watched the lion, and waited, until he was ready to leave.

Kol and Logan stayed close by. They were quiet and fully alert. Only the dozing lion drew their attention.

Baby camel cried occasionally.

The lion stood up, roared, and then ambled off.

"Rusty, go to Uden and the babies. We will be back," Robin whispered.

Robin grabbed Tanna's hand, and they ran to the remains of the mother camel. There was a good amount of meat. He skinned it, and used the hide, to wrap a few chunks of meat.

The baby waited nearby, watching them.

Tanna reached out her hand toward it.

It reached its nose closer, almost to her.

"Hurry," Robin whispered. "The camels may have alerted hunters."

She led him back to the hollow Uden rested in.

The baby camel walked up to them, and nuzzled Corandra.

Rusty walked over and stroked its nose.

"It shouldn't be this friendly," Tanna said.

Robin glanced at the camel baby as he tied the hide and meat tighter. "I think it imprinted on us. I know it saw us, and the lion did too. All the more reason to be gone."

Kol and Logan appeared asleep, lying on their sides. Ears perked up, they didn't stand. Kol rolled over as if he could sleep all day.

"Come on Uden, we have to go," Robin said.

"I can't go on."

"We aren't going on. We're going back."

Uden's faced paled even more than it already was.

"No, not all the way. Erin can help us. Trust me. You can lean on me and Tanna. We'll reach the cow lodge soon." Robin reached out to help her up.

Uden groaned as her ankle touched the ground.

"It's not too far," Tanna said. "We can be there by mid-afternoon, even going slow."

"You sure you know where we are?" Uden looked into Robin's eyes.

"Yes. We gather berries beyond that tree." Robin placed Corandra's cradleboard on Tanna's back, and Rusty had to carry her brother.

It was slow going at first. The ground was bumpy, and Robin couldn't push Uden too fast.

The camel baby stumbled along behind them.

They had to rest frequently. After a regular one march, the walls of the cow lodge appeared through the grasses.

"Oh good, the camel baby followed us," Robin said.

"He will give us food." Uden moaned as her ankle touched the ground. She slid down between Robin and Tanna against the wall.

"No," Robin said. "He provides us with cover. His prints make this look like an odd camel trail. We can't feed him though."

"We won't be safe in the cow lodge," Uden said.

"Not for long." Tanna drained her water gourd.

"What do you know about Webbel?" Robin asked Rusty as he sat back on his heels and looked at the silent child.

"They have many settlements. Mills, Shells, Kla, Water, and Hills. I think there are more. Don't have as many people. Tiny groups, like us four."

"Do you know how they took control of Shells and Mills?"

She reached out to the young camel who bleated, begging.

"Here Rusty, give it some water. We will refill soon." He tossed her a water gourd.

Rusty held it up and let the water drip into the camel's mouth.

Water wasn't food. No nutrients. It didn't seem possible the baby could live without his mother.

They staggered to their feet, lifted the babies and gatherboards to their backs, and helped Uden up. The cow lodge entrance wasn't far off.

Kol and Logan's tails wagged. Someone was nearby. Someone they knew and trusted.

Tanna's heart raced.

A bleat echoed. A sheep herd was nearby.

They waddled into view through the grass. Erin strolled through the opening behind them.

Tanna let out a sigh of relief.

The baby camel had slowed behind them, dazed and unsteady. He now bleated and raced forward.

Rusty laughed as the camel tried to find a mother camel among the sheep.

Erin stepped back and covered her chest.

"It's okay, Erin. Poor baby. We saw him born, and his mom killed and eaten by a lion. He's starved," Robin said.

"And how are you going to feed him?" Erin asked.

"A water gourd of sheep's milk," Tanna said.



Erin stared at the camel and sheep. "Okay. Let's go on in the cow lodge though." She turned the small sheep herd back the way she had come and the group followed.

"What happened to Uden?" Erin asked.

"She fell in a prairie dog hole while we were running," Robin said.

Erin leaned against one of the grazing sheep. "Not good to be running out here. Are you going to Almond?"

"Yes. Things are changing fast," Tanna said.

Erin eyed each of them, and the camel.

"Running away from, or to something. I can't tell. I wish I could help you," Erin said.

The baby camel nibbled at the sheep, making them jump and bleat.

Erin directed the sheep into the cow lodge. She walked over to her cows on the right side of the entrance.

"Ladies, I knew you'd wait. You have company. Betty, do you want a walk?" Erin walked through the cows, directing them, and patting them as she talked. The camel bleated and ran for one cow with a calf beside it. The camel lay down and stretched for the cow's udder.

The cow glanced around, pawed once, and went back to chewing her cud.

One cow, apparently Betty, followed Erin back to the gate.

"She should do. You can go on."

Rusty ran to the baby camel and patted it.

"Uden can ride Betty. She's the fastest cow, and she's the one I ride out here."

"I didn't know anyone rode the cows," Tanna said. Goddess Amber wouldn't approve.

Erin grinned. "We watch out for lions from their backs when the herds are not in the villa. Especially during the walks."

"Come on, Uden. I'll help you up," Erin said.

Robin and Erin helped pale-faced Uden up onto the cow's back.

"Is it okay?" Tanna asked.

"Sure. Strange though," Uden said.

"Thanks," Robin said. "We better be going now. We have to reach Almond."

"Be careful out there. Lots of roamers," Erin said.

"I never heard mom or Jorn mention any." Tanna adjusted the gatherboard on her back and took the baby from Rusty.

"Oh, there are many camps. I check them out occasionally." Erin gazed off into the distance.

"Anywhere particular?" Tanna asked.

"Anywhere they can hide. I need to tend the sheep. Good luck."

Erin turned to the sheep and walked off, shooing them this way and that as they bleated, walking on down the cow lodge wall.

"I guess we leave the baby camel." Robin handed Corandra up to Uden.

She pulled the cradleboard to her back without looking at her daughter.

"I'll miss it," Rusty said. "Can I come back and see it?"

"Soon. If all goes well." Tanna fluffed Rusty's curls.

Robin watched Erin off in the distance. "She knows something. What, I don't know."

They walked back through the cow lodge gate, and lifted the blocks into place behind them.

Uden rode the cow.

Betty seemed content to follow them back toward the path to their winter villa.

Tanna listened for any unusual sound. Every scurrying of feet, from the tiny mouse running out of their way, to a distant lion's roar as it caught its meal startled them. This heightened awareness of her surroundings was even more than Tanna was used to. She preferred to relax with her dogs and Zella in the villa.

Robin had walked ahead and led Rusty and the dogs.

Tanna lost track of how long they had been walking.

Uden grew pale from the pain.

The dog's tongues lolled and ears drooped.

Tanna stumbled along, keeping the buzzing flies behind Betty's tail almost out of reach. Carrying her gatherboard and a newborn was more weight than she was accustomed to. No wonder new mothers often stayed behind in the villas for the summer.

Robin paused.

Betty's tail whisked into her face, as Tanna tumbled into the mass of flies. She struggled to keep her footing, and the unnamed baby, upright in her arms.

Robin had parted the tall grass boundary leading into Almond villa.

A calm, harmonious villa, Almond wouldn't stand a chance if Orid leered at the newly gen twos there. Would Almond villa be as it had always been? Or, had Webbel influenced them?

The people of the villa stared as they stepped out of the Grass Sea.

Tanna held Rusty's hand, and the two babies in their cradleboards babbled at each other.

A few stared at Uden on Betty's back.

Betty ignored them all and chewed grass.

## Chapter 8

Songs and tales circulated around the fire.

Zella heard the sounds without the words. Dover was nearby. They both missed their apprentices. It would be a long lonely night without Tanna and Robin to talk to. All they had was each other.

While trying not to appear obvious, Zella observed the group. There were easily one hundred and seventy people here, plus the seventy divided between the winter villas. Far more than their custom allowed. The ancestors had made it clear how dangerous it was for groups be too large in any one area. They had to be careful to not anger the Goddess Amber. She simply wasn't nice when she felt they had too many people.

It had happened once. Her first memory, barely old enough to follow the dogs to the stream that flowed by their villa.

Then, the villas were about their current size, if Webbel had been honest about their current size. Several roamers had arrived at Lava villa. They had taken them in. Lava were the first to catch the devastating illness that Shims barely stopped. It wiped out a large portion of all five villas.

Zella shivered. Her own mother and sponsor, both sick, begged her to track down Quan and the Shims villa, who were collecting medicinal plants before the winter storms. She had spent days tracking with her dogs. They kept losing the scent of the Shims villa in the dust storms that were worse that season than anyone could remember.

That experience had never left her. Loneliness as she searched for help. Helplessness when her dogs lost the scent of the Shims villa. When she returned with the healers, her sponsor was dead; and her mother a skeleton, barely hanging on.

She glanced over at Dover, and he shook his head. The four villas knew. There was no need to remind the fifth villa. It might be dangerous.

He came to her and held her close while she cried on his shoulder. He had been her first choice for a sponsor for her child. Then, her baby son had died. She had never wanted to be with him again, out of fear. Now though, she did. The closeness and warmth would feel good tonight.

He held out his hand. She placed hers in his, and they walked off together, out of the happy group.

Traces of concern flickered on many faces in the firelight. Emotions fluttered under the apparently happy faces glancing their way, then back at the fire. Zella was looking for distress, so it might be there, or it might be something else entirely.

As they reached her sleeping place, Naom woke up and rolled over. Dover's two dogs arrived as well, sniffing for food. The people had feasted well. The hungry dogs guarded the pit's perimeter.

Blake said it was to protect them from the roamers, who had increased. At the last few trades, he had made many changes to the way they lived and worked at the pits. Almost as if he made the rules, and not the whole council of villas.

Zella realized now, how subtle they had been. Something new each season, and no one noticed. They could no longer go west of the dig lodge, or south of the circle. Even the fishing trip to Footprint Lake was monitored last trade meeting, or maybe even further back.

She pulled out her gatherboard and handed Naom some food.

Dover fed his two dogs, and they sat down together, to talk.

Far into the night, Zella woke up, Dover's hand on her shoulder. Something must have startled him. She didn't hear anything.

Something wasn't right.

Naom whined nearby.

The ground shook under her hands. It could be the Mad Gods. It could be bison. Or, she shuddered at the thought, it could be Rio.

The movement calmed. It wasn't bison, or it would continue to rumble.

A breeze blew in the grass behind them. Dover crawled to the edge of the sleeping area. Clouds obscured the night sky. There was no moonlight, and little starlight.

Something created light near the pits, the ones they had dug in last season. Not the ones they would dig in at sun up.

Someone stepped out of the dark dig lodge. The person led two other people, probably men from the shape of their outfit, to the unusual lighted area.

A figure crawled towards their sleeping area in the dark of night.

Zella stifled a scream. She grabbed her spear and knife, and so did Dover. They grabbed rocks and stacked them close.

The shorter grasses parted.

Jorn's head and shoulders pushed through. He crawled up to them and sat beside them. He and Dover whispered.

"What's going on?" Dover said.

"Good thing you left when you did. The later drinks were bad. People are sleeping too sound."

"What do you think they put in them?"

"A sleeping herb most likely. Somehow they have lights, that aren't fire. Not sure what they are. Also, several people came out of the dig lodge, when only one went in. I don't like it."

"We can't leave. They'd know we know," Zella said.

"We have to keep watch. At least one person awake at night. I am sending a few hunters back to find Tanna and Robin." Jorn glanced back at the eerie scene.

"Dover, is someone is sick with something and has to be kept watch over?"

"Sure. One of the Almond villa women injured herself cutting bison meat yesterday. I am sure the pain must be most excruciating at night." Dover reached for his gatherboard.

"I'll stay here. It'll be daylight soon."

"If you saw us, did anyone else?"

Jorn laughed silently. "Not likely. I sent my dog up here to wake up Naom." He stayed beside her as Dover hurried off to check on the injured Almond villa member.

Zella and Jorn watched closely, though they didn't talk.

Dover would see something as he got closer to the unnatural fire. He dashed to the Almond sleeping area and checked on the woman. He glanced around, and hurried to where he should have been sleeping. While searching through a basket, he bent over. To observe without being noticed, was a skill he knew well from healing people.

He dodged sleeping people back to the Almond villa member and wrapped her arm. The strange light glowed off to his right.

Soon, he crept back, and huddled down beside them. "They have fires in small containers. I'm not sure how they have containers that can safely hold fire and let the light out."

"Did you see the two men they took over there?" Zella asked.

Dover moved his gatherboard. "I saw their faces. They were extremely pale. I have no idea who they are. Something was vaguely familiar about one though. I've seen those haunted eyes somewhere."

Jorn tapped dried blades of grass on the ground. "Rest. I'll watch. I need to think anyway."

Trying to relax wouldn't work. It was too unusual. Tanna wasn't by her side. Even Jorn didn't act like the normal leader he always had been. Staring back at that unnatural glowing fire. Her eyes didn't close as thoughts, fears, and worries circled faster than buzzards on an old carcass.

## Chapter 9

Tanna waited on someone in Almond to say something, anything.

No one said a word. Grandmothers and grandsponsors, a few new mothers with newborn infants, and a few children waited. One young girl's body waved in the gentle breeze.

At least she knew them all. She stepped out of the tall grass, into the clearing.

Two men she didn't recognize appeared around the side of the rock walls. The walls protected Almond villa from winter's chilly winds. Walls couldn't protect them now.

Tanna gulped. Trouble was here as well. Marin hadn't said anything about roamers, or Webbel men, in their villa. The others couldn't run. Staying would mean offering herself to Goddess Amber's protection, as Zella had always done for Lava villa.

It was too soon.

Burdened with an infant meant escape was impossible. Better to fight here, than run to Klapit to face Orid.

Robin stepped forward. "We are travelers. One of our group is hurt. She needs rest. Can anyone help us?"

All of the Almond people knew him, except perhaps the infants.

The two men stood, legs far apart, hands on hips, and glared at them. One grabbed Glenna, a young girl Tanna barely knew. He jerked her up against his front and held her tight.

Glenna's face paled, and she went limp in the man's grasp.

One gen four grandmother pointed toward the treasury, usually used for sorting summer vegetables and storing food for the villa. Almond villa even stored their drums and flutes there.

A new mother who had reached gen two only last trade meeting, took Corandra from Uden. She reached for the unnamed in Tanna's arms. A hint of recognition shown in the woman's eyes as she glanced at Rusty.

Tanna didn't want to let go of the boy. A slight nod of her eye, and she handed the baby over. She patted Rusty on the shoulder and followed Robin to the treasury to help take care of Uden.

As soon as Robin had Uden in the treasury, he held his finger to his lips. Uden and Tanna watched his soundless lips behind the



finger, pointed away from the open entry. "Two unknowns, good. Must guess position."

Aloud Robin said, "Need wraps please. Can you check my gatherboard?"

Tanna reached into the gatherboard beside him and pulled out thin strips of old woven cloth to wrap Uden's swollen ankle now. How they would make it home safe, she had no idea. Home might not be safe now either. In fact, they might have runners already sent to Lava villa. It was only a fast march away.

If something happened to the infants, they would never know pain or sorrow. That was all she could hope for, for them. Her heart fluttered as she thought of the infant who had gazed at her with such mesmerizing eyes. Rusty had not joined them.

Glenna didn't look well. If those men had hurt her, it would be serious. Such a crime against Goddess Amber had never occurred in her life, and Zella had never spoken of crimes against girls barely one-third through their first gen. Marin wasn't here to invoke the law of the villa, nor could they gather the council. The council had enough to worry about at Klapit. Those memories of the odd paths had shown that. Only the council could determine what Orid and Blake were doing.

She covered a gasp. They were on the council too. At least Blake was. Orid was the same gen status as Robin, a gen two for two trade meetings. If the council became divided, Goddess Amber would be angered and wake the Mad Gods, shaking the gardens from the land.

Uden held out her hand. "You will have to go on without me. Leave me here, with Corandra."

"And the other baby?" Tanna whispered.

Uden turned her head as Robin tucked the last of the wrap in tight. "Go now."

"Where would we go?" Tanna whispered. She wouldn't leave her behind, unless there was a plan to save them all. Glenna's eyes had shone pain. A pain that had only be told in tales of the ancients.

Uden closed her eyes and didn't reply.

"No one stays behind." Robin refilled his gatherboard.

Shouts sounded in the camp.

Tanna shuddered. That voice was familiar.

"Where are the strangers? Let me see them."

Tanna's heart pounded as footsteps came their way.

The treasury windsun was pushed aside, and Orid poked his head through.

An evil grin flashed across his face.

"No one goes anywhere, especially not those two delicacies."

He grinned as he reached in, as if to grab at them, and then turned away.

Tanna let her breath out slowly. No escape now.

Uden panted, her cheeks red, and face pale.

Rusty, Glenna, and the other new mothers were in danger.

Something rustled at the back of the tent.

Tanna stifled a scream as a sunlit hole appeared at the back of the treasury.

Rusty crawled in and pulled the two infants through. "Scared," she mouthed.

"Nowhere to go." Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Tanna comforted her.

Rusty's sobs slowed as she sprawled on the ground. She reached over to her baby brother's face and traced it with her fingers. "Where is safe now?"

"Maybe nowhere," Tanna said. "One of the tales of the ancestors, is about when no one felt safe anywhere. When you didn't know who your friends were, or your enemies."

Tears welled in her eyes as she turned to Robin. "I don't want enemies."

Robin touched her shoulder gently. "Few people do. Sadly, it's those who do want enemies who create enemies for everyone."

Dusk deepened in the treasury.

Shouts sounded outside. "Move along, there!"

"On, into the center!"

Tanna pulled the windsun back enough to peek out.

Men with spears pushed and prodded the gen four adults, new mothers, and early gen one toddlers of Shims and Tuttle villas. Many stumbled. Tunics and shawls, torn from spear jabs, fluttered in the wind. A sandal broke and slipped off a toddler's foot, as a mother held his hand and clutched her newborn close to her chest.

Robin crawled up behind her.

An elderly man stumbled along at the back of the line.

"Hurry up old man. You are holding up the group."

The scout jabbed the grandsponsor in the back.

"He shouldn't be walking at all." Robin's arms tensed against her back.

"Is that the last of them?" Orid asked.

"All of this group. We don't think any escaped as we surrounded them."

"Did any fight?" Orid asked.

"Not really. They came along peacefully enough. Cried a lot, the babies." The voice of this Webbel was vaguely familiar to Tanna, though she couldn't put a name to it.

Robin stood on tiptoe above her as he glanced at the nearly two dozen people in the center of the lodges. He recited names under his breath, though she couldn't quite catch them.

He pulled her back and sat down. Holding up three fingers, he grinned.

Three had escaped. Though where they were, and how they would find help, she didn't know. She glanced back through the gap.

"Where do you want these young mothers, so we can visit them later?" One of the scouts laughed as he jerked a young woman holding an infant back against his chest. The toddler pulled loose and ran for his sandal.

"Send them and their brats into the treasury over there. The old people into this lodge. We'll wait on Lava to arrive. The scouts should be here with them soon," Orid said.

The treasury windsun opened, and three women and babies were shoved inside. Toddlers followed wiping their eyes. The women saw Robin, and relief flooded their faces.

One of them mouthed, "What now?"

Robin mouthed back. "We wait on Lava."

Aloud he said, "Are you okay?"

The three women sat down against the wall of the treasury, next to the pile of drums.

Rusty sat up and stared at them. Quiet tears rolled down her dusty cheeks.

One of the women glanced at Robin and pointed between her legs. Dried blood and fluid had left tracks down her legs, and on her tunic.

They had taken longer than Orid expected because the scouts had raped her on the way. Tanna couldn't do anything for her. She knew what Orid was like. She shivered at the memory of his touching her last summer.

Robin reached into his gatherboard, and handed the woman some leaves and bark to chew. Hopefully, the physical pain would lessen.

The woman nodded her thanks and reached for her water gourd.

Tanna tried to remember who had remained at Lava villa. Several adults and one child with a deformed leg had stayed behind. He would never be able to walk this far. Would Orid's scouts abandon him alone with only dogs to find food for him?

The noise level increased outside again.

"Here Orid, here is our group!"

Orid laughed loud and long. "Good. Send the old people into that lodge, with the others. What did you bring that kid for? You should have left him for the vultures."

"Naw, he rode on my shoulders. He may be good for something."

"Well, if you want him, keep him with you. I don't want to see him."

Tanna peeked out the windsun again, as one of the men reached the entry to the other lodge.

A fourth gen grandsponsor of several of Zella's gen, turned and said, "Orid, I thought I trained you well. You wanted to learn, you said."

A spear jabbed the elderly man in the back and leg. Blood trickled from the wound.

Orid laughed again. "What I wanted to learn was far more than you could ever teach, now off with you."

His arm waved toward the scouts as he turned toward the treasury. "Send the three women there."

The grandsponsor lowered his head and shuffled into the lodge.

Orid aimed another spear for his legs.

Blood tricked down both legs.

What did Orid want to learn from him? He was a simple gardener, and had rarely gone on to the trades. His tales of the ancestors had given her dreams. In fact, he was the person who had reminded her that people once rode horses, and kept them as pets. Then, no one ate them.

"Now to see what this young boy is doing with all of these women over here. Can't let him have all the fun."

Tanna jumped back.

Rusty was as pale as the other women. She grabbed her brother and slipped behind a container of winter windsuns. Nowhere for the adults to hide, and none would anyway, if it meant danger to the others.

The windsun opened, and Orid's jeering face appeared. He ushered the three women and their babies into the treasury, patting their bottoms as they walked past him. His arm stretched in and made a rude gesture.

A shout from outside interrupted his entrance. "Orid, we need you. There is a messenger from Blake."

He leered at each of them as they trembled. "I'll be back. Don't you worry. Relax and have some fun. Not too much." He shook his finger at Robin.

Before long, the windsun opened. Glenna and Yananda, two young girls, came in with food and water. Both looked at the ground, to hide the tears in their eyes.

They were both known to hold their heads high, as was expected of all women, until their backbones curved in fourth gen, and even then, they tried to hold them high. If those men had raped women well before they reached gen two, Goddess Amber would rage.

Tanna reached her hand out for the food. "Thanks, can you join us?"

The girls sat down in the center and passed the food plate around. Yananda glanced at Rusty, about the same age.

"With you," Glenna whispered. "Dark." They grabbed the empty food plate, and ran out of the treasury. The windsun closed back behind them.

Tales told of a time when men had been allowed to hurt women, and the consequences. The people would never allow abuse of women to occur. They would stand and fight Orid and the scouts to restore peace and Goddess Amber's blessing to the villas.

Shouting echoed outside. Hopefully, Orid would stay busy for a while. It would be night before long.

Eight women, one man, one child, two toddlers, and seven babies huddled in the treasury. At least two women too hurt to run. Not much they could do to protect themselves. Luckily, she and Robin had their spears, and Uden's.

Orid hadn't seen their weapons.

The power of the ancestor's tales would save them. Almond's musical gifts, Lava's ancestral tales, Tuttle's knowledge woven into the cloth worn by every member of the community, and Shims in the healing they carried from villa to villa.

# Chapter 10

Sleep had not returned until nearly dawn. Zella ambled toward the dig pit. She glanced at the area the people had dug in during the night. Somehow, the ground appeared dry, and undisturbed. How could that be?

Investigation would have to wait. She walked on to her roped off digging area. The usual joy at mining for useful buried artifacts was overshadowed by the scene during the night.

Facing the bushes, she chose where she wanted to focus on digging. Dover would be able to see her. Lumpy ground was hidden by apparent flatness. A few bits from previous generations peeked through the ground cover.

Tales of the gen four grandmothers said Klapit had been sorted and sifted entirely three or four times. Everyone knew there weren't many more seasons of digging left here. So little had been found in the last few seasons, it wasn't worth the effort. Which was why they only worked the ground at Fall and Spring Trades.

Maybe they weren't digging far enough. Digging deep brought its own dangers, as the walls of dirt could collapse on the diggers. Even deeper, there were tales of strange vapors that made people sick. It took so long to dig by hand, that they barely scratched the surface before they had to close the holes again. They couldn't leave the pits open between seasons either. In the early spring when the ground was damp, and late summer, after the stormy season washed more dirt away. Summer storms would throw loose dirt back in the left-over holes, and break down the walls. And winter brought animals that could fall in and die, leaving a stinky, wet mess to be cleaned up at Spring Trade.

Zella loosened the damp dirt with her broken metal digging tool. An edge broke off. She sat back and looked at the crumbling tool. Not much of a tool. The best she had. No one knew how to make this gift of the ancestors, and few had been found for several seasons now. She stabbed the dirt.

Dover wasn't making much progress either. Most people used bone shovels, or rock shovels for daily use. Metal scraps were harder to find, and tended to crumble between gatherings.

Hopefully, they would find a few new pieces of metal this digging season.

She turned the piece of metal she was using as a trowel around. Jagged edges pulled the dirt away with little effort. It had been ripped from a larger piece of metal by something far more powerful than she could imagine. The ancients had used this piece of metal for something, then split it up and buried it here in the mines for their descendants. It had raised indentions across one side. They looked like letters that did not form a word or phrase. What could "L L D" possibly mean?

Random letters on a piece of metal, all consonants, and no vowels, not a word. It must have meant something to someone. Other undecipherable codes had been found, often on the tools of the ancients similar to the ones she and Dover carried. What would they find? Her excitement rose. She shoved the trowel deep into the ground.

Glancing up, she saw Dover looking at her. The first day was always digging the old dirt away, dirt that had been moved all over the pit area. Things buried in the top few hand widths, even an arm length down usually disintegrated, as bugs and other mammals chewed them to bits. Lower, though, valuables survived. Bugs and burrowing mammals rarely dug far below the surface, particularly if they could find food close to the air.

Her trowel struck something hard. A shard of pitted bone stuck out of the dirt. It could be human or animal. She placed it in her digging artifact gourd.

Calen would gather everything they found, and redistribute it among the groups if it was useful.

A bird tweeted behind her. Dover waved his trowel left to right, and then quickly lowered it to the ground to dig again.

Calen wasn't nearby. She reached into the artifact gourd and pulled the bone back out, hiding it in her tunic. It could be made into a sewing needle. Or, perhaps, Dover had a plan for it.

As the day wore on, she found a few interesting bits of metal and plastic, dropping about half into the collecting artifact gourd. None of the dig team had found much. Scraps of artifacts, not enough to do anything with, or help the villas. They had barely



scratched the surface. There might be something lower, a few arm lengths down.

The rest of the villa members prepared the bison drying racks, and trimmed the meat. Field cuts were too thick to dry properly, though they worked to move the meat to camp. It would take the meat many days to dry, if the sun shone warm and bright.

The rest of the camp could help dig, instead of hunting this season. It might mean traveling to Footprint Lake to fish earlier.

Zella relaxed at Footprint Lake between dig seasons. While others hunted and fished, she strolled the shore, contemplating her dreams, the past, artifacts, and how they could shape the future. Often, her tales of what might have been were so intriguing the children followed her to listen as she pointed out how the rocks went together near the shore, or the lines of trees angled. Fishing, or hunting nutria, weren't among her skills. Telling tales and listening were. Nutria stew was delicious, and filling, a perfect summer meal. Her favorite meal to cook. So much so, everyone brought her nutria to have a share in her special stews.

Something cold and wet touched Zella's hand. She jumped.

Naom was beside her. The dog whined.

Most of the camp seemed to be preparing for the evening meal.

Dover came over to help her stand up. He waited as she dusted off her legs.

The group gathered around the fire pit as they ate bits of bison and a few left-over vegetables from last summer. Fresh green beans might be ready in the Klapit gardens when they returned from fishing and hunting nutria.

Blake stood up in the center of the crowd. "Please listen carefully. We are going to prepare for another hunt in two days. By then, all the bison you have hunted will be drying. The Webbel gardeners can stay to fend off the wild animals, and help the digging teams while you go hunting."

Voices clamored. People had obviously hoped to rest and enjoy a lengthy trade meeting. They didn't have many relaxing days together, and the days it took the bison to dry would be a real treat.

Blake held up his hand. "We must be prepared for the winter. The bison should be moving toward Almond and Lava summer

camp. Perhaps, you may decide to stay there for the summer and return for your cured bison later, when you pass back through."

Deep grumbles resounded from the people.

"We should have kept going then, I guess."

"Why did we stop here? We could have had a full summer meeting on the shoreline!"

"No games and taletelling?"

Blake waited for the volume to lower. "There will be taletelling and games. There will be plenty of meat with two hunts. Three bison is never enough. You know we need eight or more. You can do it!"

The grumbling continued.

Fishing nets and spears would have to be checked, cleaned, and prepared. Another hunt would give them fewer days to trade ideas, and work together.

Zella didn't trust Blake. This wasn't normal. Usually, some of the women, and most of the children, stayed behind during a hunt. Would the hunters return and find the meat from the first three bison already gone? She and Dover would be there, watching it as much as they could. Lives depended on it.

# Chapter 11

Darkness crept into the treasury. Outlines faded.

Tanna hoped there would be enough moonlight to see who was on which side. Orid's scouts could be hiding anywhere.

The people of Almond were not in the treasury with them. If the scouts went after those women first, would there be screams? Or would the strange leering roamers come to the treasury at dark?

She shivered. Orid was a nightmare, one she longed to drown under the waters of Footprint Lake.

None of them had ever fought anyone before. Fighting would awaken Goddess Amber's anger and destroy the fragile communities again, as had occurred in the tales. If Rusty and the infant were a sign, she'd have to follow what she thought Goddess Amber wanted. The woman from Shims had to be avenged within three days, if they didn't want the wrath of Goddess Amber to shake their villas apart. The council were too far away, and busy with Blake.

The noise level in the villa died down, as people settled in for the night.

Tanna reached for Robin's hand.

Logan and Kol had not appeared in the treasury, or been seen through the windsun peephole.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Zella had brought her on trips for medicinal herbs from Shims, and they had stayed at Almond overnight. Almond was never quiet at night.

What was missing?

Tanna clutched Robin's hand. She searched her memory for an answer.

The nightly flutes were missing. Until they sounded, no Almond adult, or child, would sleep.

She smiled and squeezed Robin's hand again.

A low, long drumbeat vibrated through the night air. Only those from Almond camp bothered to learn the meanings of the drumbeats. Everyone else simply enjoyed the music they produced.

Snuffling under the treasury wall startled Tanna. The board Rusty had crept under lifted up. Kol's scratched nose slipped through.

The drumbeats grew louder. Other drum and flute melodies joined them.

Tanna grabbed her gatherboard and spear. She lay on her side and peeked out the bottom of the board where Kol had lifted it.

Dusk faded into darkness.

The board lifted almost enough for her to slide through. Robin's hand on her foot sent tingles up her spine. Different from the tingles of Orid's voice or touch. Their community must be rescued from Orid and the scouts.

Tanna crawled up the side of the treasury, toward the open center of Almond villa.

Robin was right behind her.

Logan waited at the treasury corner.

Tanna peeked into the empty meeting area between lodges. A fire burned in the middle as the last rays of sunlight drifted toward the west.

Drumbeats grew stronger. Closer, and further away, as if that were possible. Almond villa created echoes that bounced off the wind walls. It sounded like they had left several players behind.

There were nearly sixty people between the four villas, and seven, or eight of the roamer scouts. Most of those left behind were elderly, new mothers, and young children. They wouldn't be much of a fighting force.

"Shut that noise up! We are trying to sleep!"

Tanna smiled at the frustration and anger in Orid's voice. No telling where he was. Though the voice seemed close, sound travelled differently here, thanks to the walls.

Drumbeats grew louder, and quicker, calling together all that were awake. As if anyone was asleep.

In the starlight, the moon began to rise.

Orid dragged Glenna's mother, naked, into the middle beside the fire. "I said shut up that noise! Or I'll make you wish you had!"

He flung the young woman down on her back, and put his foot on her leg. His evil grin scanned between the lodges.

They had to move before he hurt the woman. Or hurt her again.

No woman from the four villas would allow herself to be treated badly. Nor, would any man allow a woman to be hurt in his presence. Unless, he wanted to join the roamers. Permanently.

Drumbeats crashed.

Flutes shrilled.

Screams echoed.

Shivers danced down Tanna's back.

The sounds lifted her, and those behind her, to their feet and into the center of the village.

Orid laughed. "Go back to your lodges. You will all have your chance to be with me. Go now, and be quiet or I'll." He turned to the woman on the ground.

Logan growled.

Orid turned.

Tanna and Robin pointed spears right at him.

"Scouts!"

Pandemonium broke out. People grabbed what looked as if they had been merely twigs, barely able to trip someone. Most of those twigs were solid drumsticks.

Tanna raced forward. There would be no surprise attack. Though the distance was short, the run felt long.

Shouts and screams broke out behind, and all around her.

The woman on the ground was all she cared about.

Logan, growled low in his throat, and raced beside her toward Orid.

Tanna hefted her spear. Almost there. She didn't dare take her eyes off Orid.

If Glenna's mother wasn't frozen in fear, she should be able to crawl away from him.

She pulled her arm back ready to thrust her spear deep into Orid.

"You'll never do it," Orid said. "You haven't even killed a cow or a sheep. You're just a child I played with last trade."

Tanna's anger boiled. She was a gen two now. And not a child last trade. Even Rusty would be insulted by being called a child.

She aimed and thrust her spear at the memories.

He moved aside, laughing. "See you can't do it."

Tanna glanced at the ground.

Glenna's mother was out of the way.

She thrust again, catching his tunic.

Orid laughed and lunged toward her with his bare hands.

She dropped the spear as she stumbled over something behind her.

Orid sneered at her.

Tanna was half sprawled across the ground, her back against something, or someone. Unable to move, or reach her spear, she screamed.

Orid leered above her. Leaning over her, his hands seemed larger than his head, as they moved closer to her face.

Shrieking, she tried to back up. She was on someone's body. Half turned, and paralyzed with fear, she glanced back up at Orid.

Logan jumped on Orid from behind. Teeth bared, he plunged them into Orid's neck. Blood splattered everywhere.

Tanna was covered with blood, as Logan and Orid fell beside her.

Orid's blood puddled in the moonlight.

Logan growled over Orid's body.

Tanna breathed hard and backed away from the two bodies on the ground.

Moaning, breathing, screaming and hurrying feet, flooded through the fear. The fighting was mostly over.

Tanna crawled until she reached something to help her stand.

She wobbled until firmly on her feet and grabbed her spear.

She surveyed the area, trying to see where she was needed.

Orid had eight roamer scouts. At least one was dead. She had tripped over him. The other seven were scattered around on the ground.

People tied them up with rope.

Several who had fought were wounded. A woman cradled her arm. Blood seeped through the tunic, and a girl cried on her lap.

Others, like her, looked around, trying to see if they needed to fight anymore.

Thankfully, there had been enough able-bodied people to fight off the roamer scouts.

Robin, and a few other members of the Shims villa, tended the wounded.

People settled down around the central fire. The wounded shuffled to one side. Orid, and his scouts, tied up nearby.

She drifted over to where Robin checked on the scouts. "Only one died. The one who hurt the old man from your camp. The wounded boy and the old man killed him."

Tears rolled down Robin's cheeks.

"Don't cry, Robin. He deserved to die," one woman said.

"Certainly he did," Robin said. "No due process with them. Who knows how the Goddess will feel now. Or, what terrors she may unleash."

The old man, his wounds recently treated, stumbled up to Robin, and sat beside him. "Robin, these men did not give us due process before they hurt us. Everyone here knew what they did. They all deserve to die."

The grandsponsor put his hand on Robin's arm. "You know how to make it end. So no one suffers anymore."

"Grandsponsor, if this was only a few roamers, yes it would end. It isn't," Robin said.

Orid leered up at Tanna.

Logan had severed several veins in Orid's neck, though not the jugular. He was weak from blood loss. It wouldn't take much. That glare of hatred he shot her. She could end him with a good kick right now.

"Grandsponsor, we need these men as captives. We have no idea what they have done to Zella, to Dover, or the rest of our villas. Who can we trust now?" Her mouth squirmed as she fought to not let Orid see her cry.

The old man slumped to the ground. The fight seemed about out of him. "I hoped I wouldn't live to see a battle between the villas. War is ugly."

"Yes, Grandsponsor, the war tales of old are ugly." A gen four grandmother from Almond villa tottered up and held her hands out to him. "Without war, and its ensuing peace, our ancestors would never have been brought together, and we would not exist. Do you begrudge us our lives, or the beautiful memories we had together?"

The old man smiled. "I wish it could be any other way."

The woman smiled as she pulled his head down to her lap. "So do I. The young hear the tales, and occasionally chose the wrong person as their hero. Occasionally, the evil ones are so embellished the listeners are confused. They must re-live the wars of gens past."

If for nothing more than to keep the specter of war, and its consequences, ever present in the memory of the living."

"Goddess Amber must be appeased." Tanna said.

Robin tucked in the wrap on one scout's arm. "For now, we set a watch and rest until morning. We don't know enough."

Kol and Logan guarded the children.

Tanna had covered Rusty, Glenna, and Yananda with a blanket, and watched their eyes close. It had been a long day. As they dozed off to sleep, she left Logan and Kol beside them, on the ground.

No one had wanted to go back into the treasury, or the lodges. They feared not being able to escape. Tanna didn't want to think about it either.

Logan and Kol jumped to their feet barking, as did the other dogs in village. They raced to the side closest to Klapit.

Tanna quivered as she waited for the inevitable. She grabbed her spear. Who would walk into the firelight? No animal. They would have heard it by now.

Six shadows stretched into the firelight.

Logan and Kol jumped up on their shoulders.

"Down, boys." A familiar voice spoke.

Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava ushered two men and a woman from Shims. What were they doing here? She glanced across at Robin, unsure.

He smiled at the three from the Shims villa who had escaped the raid earlier that day.

The Webbel villa could be recruiting from the other villas.

Tanna didn't quite trust them. Spear ready, she waited to hear what they would say.

Others obviously felt the same, with spears, rocks, and sticks in hand, and ready if needed.

The specter of war had awakened.



## Chapter 12

The moon set, and the stars grew brighter. Daybreak soon. Zella's watch had been uneventful, as had Dover's early watch. The dig lodge had been undisturbed.

The hunter's scouts would leave by midmorning. Movement near the food preparation area grabbed her attention. She thought that some people were waking up, to prepare breakfast for the travelers. Glancing away, then back, she realized those people were going elsewhere.

Three people entered the dig lodge. A tiny light flickered inside, barely visible under the entry windsun.

The light disappeared.

The windsun pulled back, and one person stepped out and turned to face the wall before walking off.

No light flickered, other than the moon on the person's hair.

Dover breathed hard beside her. He had seen too.

"We have to go in there," Zella whispered. "I am sure something is odd about that place. I felt so the first day we came."

"See if you can send Naom for a walk in that general direction. I'll crow caw if needed."

Zella pointed. "Naom, search."

Naom meandered off towards the dig area.

Zella strolled through the mingled groups of sleeping people.

Naom was on the other side. She sat down and pointed her face toward the area where Zella would be working later in the day.

When Zella reached her, she patted her head, exaggerating as if the dog were in trouble, in case anyone was watching. As she walked back, she casually threw a bone for Naom. Carelessly, she let it bounce off the wall of the dig lodge.

Naom retrieved it. She sat beside the wall.

Zella approached the entry. With her back to the entry, she attempted to push the entry aside.

It wouldn't move.

This entry was always kept open. Dig leaders used to come here and rest after a long hot day, because the stones were refreshingly cool to lean against.

She sat down to rub Naom's head, as she often did.

The dog gnawed on the bone.

Zella signaled her to follow.

Something was definitely wrong here. Two men were trapped, or hidden, in the dig lodge. No men had been reported missing from the villas. Nor had anyone been to see the council for damage done to another person, or villa.

Not knowing what these men could have done for Blake to allow this to happen, bothered Zella. Jorn had not mentioned any crime, or atonement. Surely, Blake wasn't disregarding the crime and punishment laws. If the Mad Gods were disturbed, and they woke the Rio, the herds might leave the region. Without the herds, the already overcrowded villas would have less food, and sickness would come again.

Zella hurried with Naom back to her sleeping place trying to pretend everything was normal.

It wasn't.

Everything was far from normal. How were the two people, being held in the dig lodge, and why? If the answers didn't come, she would have to find them.

As the hunting scouts gathered that morning for a quick travel meal, the mood was more subdued than usual. Normally, they were loud and looked forward to the active chase. Everyone seemed to sense something was wrong.

Jorn half-smiled at her as he hoisted his gatherboard. A tear glittered in his eye, as he grabbed a piece of drying bison and turned away without a word to her.

The group passed through the opening in the Grass Sea, and were soon invisible. Usually they left camp singing. Songs echoed as the diggers went back to their pits. Not today. The wind barely whispered through the grass.

All of her family and friends were now gone. Except Dover. The world had changed and taken them away. What tale of the ancestors would they meet? If they returned, would the world have changed them?

His hand reached for hers.

They had each other, for now. Zella turned back to the barely turned pits.

Anything could happen on these hunts, and often had. One reason the group usually sang as they walked away was to warn lions of their coming, until they reached an area they were likely to find herd animals. Silently leaving camp wasn't smart, or safe, for those who left, or those left behind.

Zella unconsciously dug through the dirt. Her mind raced, trying to find a way to protect her family and friends. None appeared in her memories of the tales she had repeated. She sat up on her knees. Tears streamed down her face, as she looked up at the thin, wispy clouds above. "Goddess protect us," she said.

Laughter startled her.

"Don't you know by now, there is no goddess?" Blake said.

"Since you aren't working anyway, why don't you and your friends come with me. You haven't found many useful objects. We can go rest in the shade by the dig lodge." He walked away.

How long had he been watching her? Zella wondered. For that matter, how long had she been staring at the sky? She glanced down at her empty artifact gourd. He was right about one thing; they hadn't found much. Sighing, she turned her artifact gourd over her digging tool, and followed behind Blake with Dover, Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala.

Zella and Dover leaned up against the chilly foundation of the dig lodge. The air was already steamy, with a warm breeze blowing through the grasses all around Klapit. A fresh baked bread smell conflicted with the metallic stone odor. With all the warmth surrounding her, an icy shiver raced through her heart as she leaned against the stones of the building and wondered what mysteries it held. She didn't want to find out, at least not with Blake there.

Blake waited until they refreshed themselves from their water gourds before beginning. "The hunters are gone. We all know this pit is empty. It has been mined since the ancestors died. We have taken all they have left for us here."

"We've barely scratched the surface." Varl handed a water gourd to Sharel.

"I am going to send you out in two groups to find a new pit."

Zella's eyes opened wide as everyone else gasped. She knew someday it would come. She had hoped to be the one to initiate it

at a council meeting, or even Dover. And the whole group of villas should go together for safety. It would have meant a summer without nutria, or preserved fish, for winter.

"Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala, you will go directly west from here. According to some tales we have heard, there should be another pit about five day's march southwest. I'm not sure the exact location. Or even if you will be able to recognize it. The Grass Sea can hide pits the ancestors left us, that haven't been mined. Take your digging tools with you. You may need them to find the actual pit location."

Blake then turned to Zella and Dover. "Since you left your helpers behind, I will send Calen with you. There should be another pit about three days northwest, according to our villa's tales. I haven't heard of it being mentioned in any other villa's tale, so it must have belonged to the ancestors of Webbel."

"Who will watch the drying bison meat?" Zella said.

Blake laughed. "Don't worry. My villa members who stayed behind to mind the gardens will watch it. Don't worry about digging anymore today. Prepare to leave, as you must go quickly in the morning. Take your dogs with you."

Lava villa had a little-known tale about a place to the northwest. She couldn't quite remember the tale. Her mother had told it once before she left.

The afternoon was spent packing, and wishing she felt safe to hide a few things behind. They usually did during the summer fishing trip. When she was gen one, and her mother was dig leader, that the dig team stayed at the pits all summer long. If only, she could stay here, a solution might come. Zella made sure her digging tool was in her gatherboard, with the empty artifact gourd hanging on the side.

Morning came, and Zella and Dover hugged Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala as they set off walking southwest. It would take them many days to find the new pit. And many days to find their way back.

She and Dover turned to wait on Calen.

He stumbled wearily up to them. His huntboard slipped off his shoulder. "Sorry, had to finish packing this morning." Red faced,

and panting, in the early morning sunshine, he tried to adjust his huntboard.

Dover faced the northeast, picked up his gatherboard, and pointed out a tiny dot moving in and out among the far, high clouds.

Zella looked up to where he was watching and tried to make out what bird it could be. It disappeared, far off in the direction they were to go.

She tapped her thigh and Naom joined her.

Dover's dogs had gone with Jorn on the hunt.

They started down the path through the Grass Sea toward Footprint Lake, and turned off into the unknown beyond where Blake could hear them. Zella didn't look back.

It was quiet. Klapit would be a hive of activity soon, that much was obvious. Blake, the gardeners, and those unknown people in the dig house were searching for something.

What Webbel were looking for, she had no idea, and wasn't sure she wanted to know. They could be searching for something, or hiding what they had already found. The bison meat might be gone when they got back. If they got back, she corrected. Calen was a Webbel, and had been told to go with them.

Zella sighed, patted Naom's head, and gave the motion to go ahead and scout a trail. She took off, almost out of sight. Dover walked mostly behind her, saying little. Every now and again, he would step up beside her to remind her he was there.

Calen huffed and wheezed behind them. They paused occasionally to let him catch up. He shouldn't be out of breath. The summer routine meant everyone walked several days. Calen wasn't old enough to be having breathing trouble, that only happened to gen four adults. At one point, she raised her eyebrow when Dover looked at her.

His nod was almost imperceptible.

At least he noticed.

# Chapter 13

Tanna didn't trust the new arrivals. She knew them. Gel was Jorn's preferred advisor. Haro and Kleal were almost gen two apprentice hunters and advisors.

Jorn had seemed quiet for many days before the trip. Gel and Haro had been gone, and returned with no food. Unusual for well-trained hunters. Perhaps they knew more about Webbel's secret activities. Zella, and the gen four members of Lava, had taught her tales of greed and fear. Occasionally, greed took over. For now, she'd watch and listen.

"Join us," Robin said.

Gel nodded, and the six newcomers placed themselves around Orid, and the other bound men.

Their short sleep around the fire pit had been uneasy. The cries and moans of the injured Webbel men, and the injured villa members kept them wakeful.

At the first softening light in the sky, declaring the beginning of a new day, Tanna sat up.

Rusty, nestled beside her, rubbed her eyes.

The sky grew paler, grayish, then whitish, barely enough light to see by. She glanced at the young girl.

Rusty appeared unhurt, only a few scratches. Invisible sores were often the most dangerous. After witnessing the battle, and knowing both her parents were dead, she might give up the will to live.

Tanna didn't know for sure what all had happened to Rusty. Or, what the child may have imagined happening to her. The fear of some of those events could be worse than the actual trauma itself. Some of Orid's roamer scouts had been loose in the villa before Rusty had scrambled into the treasury. If they had hurt her, after all she had been through to reach Zella and Tanna safely, it could lead to deeply scarred memories.

The gen four grandsponsor who had been speared in the back and the leg moaned nearby. So far, he hadn't given up living.

She crawled to his side.

"Tanna, no longer child, you must have the strength." He drew a few deep breaths.

Tanna knew the spear in the back hadn't gone too deep. If the man had trouble breathing before, the spear had worsened it.

"The strength to go on. For you. And everyone here."

"Do you think Zella, and everyone else is safe?"

He looked up at her. "I cannot know. Only the Goddess knows now, and she isn't saying." He paused to breathe.

Goddess Amber never quit speaking to those she chose, did she?

"I wasn't much of a spiritual leader." He lifted his arm to his head, resting his wrist on his damp brow.

Tanna touched his skill necklace. Both the Shims and spiritual leader charm were well worn from holding while communicating with Goddess Amber.

"I told Quan to go ahead as normal, only leaving a few extra people." His eyes closed as his brow furrowed.

She could be this man someday. With her children and grandchildren gathered around her, or scattered at the whims of the violence Orid had awakened.

"The leaders knew something was wrong. How could I advise them?" He tried to turn his head and winced as a cut reopened and seeped dark blood.

"Grandsponsor you did the best you could."

He struggled to sit up. "No. We didn't do the best we could." He gasped for air. "We broke the command. We kept secrets."

"There are no secrets." She tried to comfort him.

Robin hurried to her and the grandsponsor.

"Grandsponsor, what more could you do? You did as our ancestors did. What more could we ask?"

"Honesty." He breathed hard, laying on his back.

"Honesty in all things. Not keeping secrets, even from children, particularly from young adults." His voice rasped as he drew in sharp breaths.

Robin motioned. He and Tanna pulled the weakened man into an upright position to breathe.

The gen four grandmother from Almond who had soothed him last night came up to them, awakened by his cries. She sobbed as

she held his hand. "I always loved him. My children and grandchildren know. I don't want him to go like this. Vengeful spirits are always so sad." She held his hand in hers and pulled it to her face.

The grandsponsor didn't move. His breathing slowed to normal, then almost invisible.

"He has given up the will to live. He thinks he failed us. I think he gave us our only hope." A tear winked in Robin's eye. "He did not sponsor Orid or Blake. Nor lead them to their evil ways. He did the best he could."

"Will his spirit haunt us?" Rusty slid up beside them.

Tanna hugged her close. "Let us hope not. Or if he does, may he continue to lead us to peace, as he has always tried to do."

The old man's eyes fluttered.

A baby cried.

Uden curled up, with arms around her own baby, and the unnamed boy.

Tanna turned back to the old man, the grandsponsor of so many people. She couldn't tell if he was breathing.

"I gave him some medicine to soothe him," Robin said. "His external injuries won't heal until the internal ones do."

Yananda and Glenna pulled Rusty away from the dozing grandsponsor.

"That baby may help her. And those other two as well," Robin said.

Tough decisions had to be made today. The law demanded it. Without their leaders, making a decision was usually frowned on. Goddess Amber's will would be done, once it was determined. If the grandsponsor could no longer hear her, someone in the mixed-up villa of villas should be able to hear and heed her voice.

"How can I know who to trust?" Tanna said.

"Do you trust anyone?" The grandmother asked.

Tanna trusted Robin, and the grandmother. Maybe Rusty, who was becoming more like a sister to her. "Very few, right now. I don't know who to trust. Which truth is the real truth?"

The grandmother touched Tanna's hand. The hand, which held hers, was tough and pliable as leather, shaking, yet with a firm grip. "Granddaughter, if you lose all trust in the people you know, he, and



his followers, win!" The old woman pointed a crooked finger towards Orid.

Tanna glanced at him.

His face smirked. He couldn't talk, and maybe never would again after the throat injury and swelling. Even without a voice, he could do irreparable damage with his eyes and hands.

She shuddered. Tanna wouldn't let him win. Not now. Not ever.

"Come on Tanna, let's eat and talk." Robin reached for her hand.

She followed him to the small group gathered in one of the lodges.

Tanna drank a gourd of warm water, and watched the other people.

The three Shims escapees, and the three Lava villa members sent to help them talked low in a corner.

Tanna didn't trust them now. Unlike before she left Lava with Zella. She had studied the tales. All the old problems were beyond the memories of living people. The fear of death and conflict lived on. The beginning of the end of the ancestors began ten gens ago. Fighting, battles, and further loss continued for at least five gens. Even the oldest alive, like the grandsponsor and grandmother here, had seen some of the later fighting between groups over the limited resources. At least once, all the adults from the villas had died in battles, leaving only gen four and gen one members to keep the villas alive.

As the villa numbers dwindled, they had learned to live within their resources. There had been hope that life would be better, and no memories of war would exist in a few more gens. No one wanted the grandsponsors to die. After their deaths, everyone alive would have known relative peace with the Goddess, and other people.

From a broken world, it had been a long, painful road to a steady daily life. Tanna wanted it to stay that way. She stepped up to the three from her villa. "Gel, Haro, Kleal why did you come? Why after the battle?"

Gel sat her gourd down. "We didn't intend to be late. We met a messenger from Orid to Blake. Wale, Ida, and Brix had fought with him. Blake will never know."

The return massagers wouldn't make it to Blake.

Zella wouldn't know the danger Tanna had been in.

"The sound of fighting reached us a march from here. Even though we ran, we reached the villa boundaries as Kol attacked Orid. Then, we waited, knowing it was over." Gel touched the rim of her gourd.

"I wish we had been here sooner. We stayed on the perimeter and made sure no roamer scouts escaped to warn Blake." Gel's eyes rimmed with tears as she looked up at Tanna.

The right course of action, if Gel was being honest. The grandsponsor's tales of battles fought, even from a gen who died before she was born, would strike fear into any heart. Her grandsponsor's parents had seen one of the last great battles. Surely the night before hadn't been any worse than the tales told around the fire pits to scare the young from fighting amongst themselves.

"What do we all do now?" Robin said. "Obviously, the gardens have been abandoned to the wild animals this season. We will have few vegetables to see us through the winter."

"We can't all stay here. Most of those who stayed behind can't walk to summer camps. Grandsponsor there, he shouldn't be up at all." Gel looked at the old man and sighed. He was her mother's sponsor.

"We can't go back, and leave the weak, sick, and women behind," Kleal said.

One woman from the Almond villa spoke up. Tanna couldn't remember her name, only her face. "We could always multiply our garden here. We can grow enough for the winter here."

"Drea, can you?" Robin said. "You have enough seed?"

"I have two growing season's worth stored in an underground pit."

"Good, it will keep everyone busy and focused." As well as watching for more roamers. Tanna sat her gourd down.

"You have two days, Drea. We will all help you dig and plant. Hopefully, the seeds will be planted, and not growing if, and when, trouble comes here again." Hopefully, Zella would have fixed the mess at Klapit and be back by then with the full council.

"I have to trust each of you. Two days of hard work for us all. Then we will decide what to do. Drea show us your seeds and tools."

Grandmother smiled at her.

"What about Goddess Amber?" Someone asked.

"We have three days to hear from the council."

Three days to make a decision without angering Goddess Amber more than she already was.

# Chapter 14

The height of the Grass Sea lowered, down below their armpits. Zella pushed the grass out of the way, bending it down gently. No sense in wasting the food of the wild herds they depending on for food, clothing, and shelter. After they passed, it should spring right back up. The trail back would be difficult to follow. Naom could track it. As long as Blake didn't send any dogs after them, they'd be safe enough.

Calen huffed and struggled along behind them.

The sooner they discovered the new pit, and returned to Klapit to report to Blake, the better. She wanted to be at Klapit when, or if, Tanna and Robin returned. Who knew when that would be. Her spine tingled. Blake's unnoticed signs needed to be remembered and added to the tales.

The grass changed again to an even shorter type, prime habitat for wild horses.

Zella glanced back.

Dover followed her trail, leading Calen.

Calen's face was red. He panted, unable to breathe properly.

Dover's eyes begged her to stop.

Along the plain in front of her, there was a line of brush to the west, a sign of a small stream.

Dover caught up with her.

Sweat poured off Calen's face. His tunic was soaked through. He staggered to the ground. The fat around his arms continued moving, even though he had settled to the ground.

Horses galloped into view and raced for the tree line.

With that speed, long distances could be crossed swiftly. Even though the sun shone brightly, and sweat dripped off her brow, she froze with that thought. If she could think these thoughts, so could other people. If the Webbels had horses, they could cross vast distances quickly. Horses could explain some of the odd sightings at Klapit. With their strength, they could make the paths, and move the giant trees from other places to there.

Zella gasped. Goddess Amber would be angry. She had taken horses from their ancestors only a few gens before. Horses had been hurt and killed in the ancestor's wars. They had been

weapons and tools. Even used as ways to prove wealth, and keep secrets, all things they should never do. It was okay to hunt a horse for food, never for anything else.

Had this been what happened to Blake, and the Webbels? Had they ignored Goddess Amber's words?

Calen collapsed. His face was red, and his breathing ragged.

"Calen needs fresh water from that stream." Dover grabbed his water gourd and walked across the open grass. The horses moved back east, away from the brush. They watched him, and didn't graze, until Dover was in the brush.

Zella's legs spread wide, and with her hands on her hips.

Calen's head moved in circles.

Good, he is hallucinating in this heat. "Tell me about the horses."

Calen groaned.

"Do you have horses?"

A groan escaped, and Calen lifted his fat hand to his forehead.

"What do you have? How are you traveling so fast? Why?"

He passed out.

Dover would have to work to keep him alive.

Calen had once been special to her. A trusted friend, an artifact hunting partner, never a romantic partner. When Orid had been given to him, he joined Blake leading the Webbel villa as dig leader.

Orid hadn't boasted and bragged in camp. Where was he? Shock and worry seized her.

Where was her daughter, her only child? Was Tanna safe from Blake and Orid?

Neither of the two captives in the dig lodge looked like him. Blake would never do that to Orid. They had always been too close. Though Calen was his sponsor, according to Orid's mother.

Dover returned and gave the water gourd to Zella.

As she recovered, she tried to help Dover with Calen.

He couldn't walk the distance Blake expected them to travel, and they couldn't abandon him here. If Blake sent hunters, he would follow their trail. Or, the lions and tigers would. The Grass Sea was too big a place for only two people to travel alone because the grass covered their heads.

"Calen, you have to make it to that tree line. Get better please," Zella said. "Dover, what is the water like?"

"Drying up. There are a few good resting spots there. Help me lift him."

Calen groaned as they lifted and supported his unexpectedly overweight body between them. His head wavered from side to side. Lifeless feet dragged the ground behind them.

"Heat sick. Not good." Dover said. "He will have to rest in the shade. I have some herbs that will help."

"We haven't come far, only a little more than a march." Zella grunted and pulled his foot out of a ground cat hole.

They didn't try to speak as they helped their friend across the ground to the brushy riverbed.

Dover sat him down on the ground under the shade of brush trees. "Calen can't walk far because he hasn't in many seasons."

"He is always at the trades," Zella said.

"Perhaps. Quan has had his suspicions. We haven't had a chance to talk safely. Wait till Calen wakes. Trust me." He smiled at her.

So, even Dover and Quan were hiding something. She reached for his hand. If he hadn't said anything until now, that meant there was someone else he hadn't trusted. They had been alone the two nights, except for when Jorn had joined them. Perhaps it was Jorn he didn't trust. Her own brother had acted a little strange after Fall Trade. More watchful, and cautious.

Zella and Dover sat quietly by the trickling stream. It was enough to water the animals in this region on occasion. It wasn't enough to be dependable. She thought about the events of the last several days, and waited on Calen to wake up, if he did.

The wind shifted.

A new, dusky odor permeated the air.

Feet padded softly on the ground near them.

Twigs bent as branches snapped.

A lioness stalked through the brush.

Zella stifled a warning whistle.

Though the lioness glanced around, she seemed unaware of the three people. Behind her were two cubs, frolicking and playing as if they had nothing better to do. The lioness licked the cub's

heads, and pushed them down gently with her paws. Then she took off into the grass, crouched low.

Zella clutched Dover's hand.

The lioness was hunting horses. She had left the cubs in the secluded brush, not even aware the humans could see them. Usually lionesses hunted in packs. There could be more nearby.

They couldn't drag Calen away without alerting the cubs. Nor would they leave him behind for the lioness to find on her return.

Branches crackled and small mammals fled as the lion cubs wrestled and played by the edge of the brush. Every now and then, one would run a ways into the grass, chased by the second.

Spooked horses stampeded.

The top of the lioness's head was barely visible as she sprinted through the grass trying to catch the horse nearest the direction the people had come from.

The cubs took off running too, toward Zella and Dover. Large kittens, the cubs were strong enough to knock her down, if they tried.

Zella grabbed a stick beside her and held it up as the cubs crashed through the brush in front of her and almost into her lap. They snarled as they leaped backwards tumbling over each other, biting and racing away, back to a place beyond where their mother left them. Once they got there, they sat down and made mewling cries to alert their mother to danger.

"We have to go now," Dover said.

"How?" Zella asked.

Calen was passed out on the ground. He needed rest, and shade.

"We have to make a dragging stretcher. Quick, those two limbs look strong enough. We will have to tie him to them with his tunic," Dover said.

She grabbed the two long limbs. They felt weak and spongy to her. They couldn't wait to look for anything stronger.

With one side of Calen's tunic open, she gasped at the sight of his spongy body. The tunic had hidden his weight gain well. No one would ever have guessed.

Dover pushed the limbs through the neck. He stabbed them through the bottom of the tunic, tying each end onto the stick.

Zella glanced up to verify the location of the cubs.

Mewing cubs hadn't moved. One pawed at the other, and they soon lost interest in mewing.

The lioness could be coming back through the tall grass, dragging the horse, and they wouldn't see, or hear her.

At last, the stretcher was as complete as it could be in a hurry.

"Across the creek. We can cross back over here later," Dover said.

Zella grunted and took her side of the stretcher. They could make it easier to use later, if Calen survived and was unable to walk.

They waded across the creek.

Calen's feet bumped into rocks, and bounced across the ground. He would be alive, even if his feet and legs were bruised tomorrow.

Almost out of sight of their hiding place, they heard a roar.

The lioness had found her cubs with Zella's scent on them. She shivered at the thought. The lioness would never forget her scent, and might track her down. At least she and Dover had spears, though where they could safely sleep tonight, out in the open, she didn't know.

She knew how she would feel if a strange creature touched her child. The mother lioness must feel the same way. A whole pack of lions might return and track them down.

Pulling the poles of the stretcher released some of the mental tension, while creating more physical tension. A hunter would be used to creating stretchers for meat and pulling it back to the villa, or trade meeting. Something she had never done, so her arms were not as strong as a hunters would be.

She and Dover pulled the stretcher as long as they could.

Panting she looked back the way they had come. No sign of the lioness, and no sounds of her following them. Surely, the lioness had smelled them, and even heard them.

Zella looked down at Calen. His face was pale, and red splotched. His eyes opened, and his breath was labored.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Dover reached for Zella's hand and they walked a short distance off. "Zella, I think Blake sent Calen out here with us to die."



"And we were supposed to go back, or go on?"

"Not sure. Going back would mean certain death. Who knows what waits for us where he is sending us, if the place exists," Robin said.

"Or if the people he sent to find us look in the same place we are going. We have to change direction."

Dover grinned. "We already did, of a sort. You led us off in the direction we were supposed to go. Then, we veered further west than he would have expected. We can't stay here. We have to keep going, somewhere."

"I wish we could find Tanna and Robin."

Dover took her hand. "I wish we could to. They are gen two adults. They have to fend for themselves. The Shims villa left several people behind. With the people Jorn sent, they will do their best."

"Horses, camels, sleds." Calen groaned. "Home, now."

Zella reached for him. "No, don't die. We need you."

"They will kill me if I don't die, or worse." Calen stared at her. His eyes pulled back, far away into his head.

"Is he delirious?" Zella asked Dover.

Dover's hands rested gently on her shoulders. "Those men in the hut. The captives. What did they do?"

"Gifts," Calen whispered. "They brought gifts. Wind, and captive light."

"They will kill him if they know what he told us," Dover said. "Our lives could be in danger too. We have to hurry. A cow could help pull this stretcher, and we need help."

"You must tell me what you know," Zella said.

Dover touched her hand. "Calen will. Soon."

Zella didn't intercede with Goddess Amber often. Now she would.

She took Calen's hand and Dover's in her own. Three, joined together as best they could. "Goddess Amber," she whispered watching the clouds. "Wherever you are, please come to us. Once again, don't let the strong destroy the weak. Help us find peace."

Nothing seemed different.

Calen breathed raggedly, barely alive.

Dover stood behind her, supportive as always.

A tiny dot circled high, far away. As it came closer, it whirled and danced in the sky. It barreled down toward the ground. A precious bald eagle soared past them.

She drew in her breath as it pounced near her, and pulled a mouse from the grass.

The eagle watched her as the mouse squeaked in its sharp talons. It turned its head this way and that, and took off in a mostly northerly direction.

# Chapter 15

Tanna followed the others to the garden area. The stone trowel in her hand wasn't as good as a metal one. Those were nearly impossible to find. She and Zella needed new ones for their work in Klapit as well.

"Where the wall is low, open it so we can have a walkway to that glade," Drea said. "We never use that area. It sure is trying to grow trees though. Everyone has avoided it for some reason. The gen four grandmothers said it wasn't to be used while they lived."

That was unusual. Normally, any garden areas were kept clear and ready to plant. Almond's primary garden was well tended, and large enough to feed their villa, and half of another one. Their squash always grew the best. Their gourd collection was their main trade staple, along with their music.

Some gourd vines grew over the wall and into the forbidden area. Perhaps the gen four grandmother would tell her the forgotten tale of the past. Tales needed to be saved to protect the future.

Drea's instructions to others floated in a sea of sound. Adults would dig holes. First gen toddlers would follow behind, planting the seeds and covering the holes. Glenna and Yananda would bring water to those working, as well as carry water for the seeds and plants already growing.

An unusual kind of rock formed the waist high wall. It was different than any wall in the other villas. Though similar to the rock in the trade herd lodge.

Tanna searched for another smaller rock, so as not to mess up her only digging blade. One fit the palm of her hand perfectly. Two rocks were lower than the others were, with visible cracks. She grabbed a stick from nearby, set it across the lines, and pounded it.

The split spiraled like a spider web, increasing with each hit. A few taps at the next fault line, and they almost met. She stepped over the moss-covered wall and did the same on the other side. Back and forth she worked, until the rock was loose.

"Robin, come help me move these, so they don't break. We can put them back in the fall."

He wiped his brow and walked over to help her.

The ground under the bottom rocks was different. It didn't look like dirt. As soon as the stones were out of the way, she checked the ground. She rubbed the fine, loose soil, almost like the sand at Footprint Lake. Her trowel dug the sandy dirt out. The tool vibrated when it hit something hard.

Tanna cleared a space as big as her knees.

Beside her, Robin pulled the dirt and sand out of the way, and kept it from falling back into the hole.

She cleared the top of what appeared to be a wooden board. The wood crumbled at her touch. An artifact of their ancestors. She had to save it and share it with Zella, who would pass it on to Jorn to determine how the council would decide its fate among the villas. Most likely, it would come back to Almond's dig leader, Marin, once Zella had determined its past, and created a new tale to recite around the trade fire pits.

Robin pointed at the crumbled wood bits.

An artifact had been hidden there, under the wooden board. She reached in and pulled out something the size of her palm. Gently, her fingers tapped the dirt off. Leaning over and holding it close to her mouth, she blew away the last bit of dust, and stared in wonder.

Tanna rocked to her feet.

Where she was, and what was going on around her, faded into the background.

In her hands was a figure of a horse with a person on its back. She had never seen a figure of a person on a horse. People caught and ate horses. They didn't ride them. Or, at least not in living memory. Someone had hidden this here, for good, or bad.

The horse's mane and the person's hair were amber colored. A tingle of electricity shot through her. The figure meant something important. She raced to the village tumbling over toddlers and garden plots.

In the sunshine outside a lodge, the gen four grandmother and grandsponsor rested.

"Grandmother, Grandsponsor, see what I found! Tell me the tale please!" Tanna fell at the feet of the grandmother and placed the figure in her lap.

The grandsponsor rolled over enough to peer into her lap at the figure.

The grandmother picked up the figure. "Young woman, where did you find this?"

"Buried in the rock wall around the garden. Drea said we have to move it, or at least make a walkway."

A chicken pecked at the ground beside the gen four grandmother.

Blood seeped from a wound on the grandsponsor's arm.

"This figure has a past. It is ancient they say, or so my mother told me. As her mother told her." The grandmother stared at the sky. Her eyes searched for something beyond what the people could see.

Tanna tried to wait patiently. She rested her hand on the woman's knee.

The grandmother looked down at her, tears in her eyes. She picked up the figure and turned it in the light.

"Once, long ago, battles were fought and won in machines that could go fast. Faster even than these magnificent creatures."

Even though the gen four grandmother sat in front of Tanna, the woman's mind raced among the dark clouds gathering overhead.

"No one remembers them. Even when I was born, only a few had seen such wonders. People used them for bad things." She looked into Tanna's eyes. "The Goddess felt more people died because of the machines than lived, so she took them away."

The grandmother's hands trembled. "We were left with horses and camels to travel fast. On horseback, a day's walk could be covered as quickly as a meal eaten."

She held the figure, rocking it as if it were running across her lap. "Then the battles on horseback and camels came. Not many people died, mostly the animals. Some villas had many more animals than people. More than all the people you have ever met. From far away, as well as near. While other villas had few animals, or none."

"As a young child, I remember." A faraway look continued in the grandmother's eyes.

She hugged the figure close to her. "This figure looks like my special horse. My sponsor wanted to send her to battle. And I hid this figure, to protect her. I wanted her back."

The grandmother's sad face peered down at Tanna. "My sponsor became angry when all the horses he sent died, or disappeared. He said it was my fault. For hiding the figure instead of displaying it, so it could see the sun and feel the wind."

She held the figure close against her chest. "By then, it was too late. Too many animals, and people, had died needlessly. So few were born the next season, we knew we could never replace our once vast herds. I turned the few we had left loose in the Grass Sea."

Chickens pecked closer, almost drowning out her voice.

Tanna strained to listen.

"My sponsor found out. He was furious. He gathered men, and rounded the horses up. They put them back into their fenced in horse lodge. It rotted long ago."

Robin touched Tanna's knee.

Her hands trembled as she recalled the scene. "During the night, a series of shrieks and screams echoed through the villa. No one dared go near the horse lodge. In the morning, all the horses were dead, hacked to bits." Her hands dropped to her lap.

Shaking hands handed the figure back to Tanna. "Keep this safe. The Goddess saw what we did, trying to control others with animals, and took them away. We could no longer surprise others on the backs of animals."

"Did any survive?" Robin leaned closer.

"Only those who my sponsor never found, perhaps." The grandmother grew quiet as she held back her tears.

"And Shims villa could no longer hurry to help the sick or dying either," Tanna said.

"Too many died of that sickness that almost took your mother's mother and did kill her sponsor. I feared it was my fault. I know now it wasn't. Goddess Amber found a way to save those who deserved to live."

"And some who didn't," the grandsponsor said.

"What about the baby camel? We left it with Erin. Can't we keep it? Are we breaking the Goddess's commands?"

The grandsponsor adjusted on the pallet. "Perhaps not. Have you heard the voice of Goddess Amber? She may feel your gen can learn to share them. Then again, maybe it is an opportunity to gain easy food, and learn to herd them like sheep and cows."

Tanna touched the statue. If Goddess Amber had spoken to her, she hadn't heard her voice, only the whisper of the Grass Sea blowing in a breeze caused by the horses running.

"Without more, there will never be a herd. You could learn to ride it. Look at the figure. It will be a few seasons before that baby could carry a person's weight. Maybe blankets now, nothing more." The grandmother sighed as she reached for the man beside her. "I wish your generation could begin again with horses. Maybe you need them, to fight Blake and Orid. I hope not."

"I hope not too." Tanna hid the horse figure in an interior pocket of her tunic. The one she usually kept for herbs found while exploring. She didn't want Orid, or his roamer scouts to see it. No telling what kind of luck that might bring.

"Do you need anything? I better go back to the garden."

"No dear Tanna. Thank you for coming."

As she turned to leave, the grandmother reached out. "And as much as the memories hurt, thank you for waking them up. Maybe they need to be re-lived." She turned to the man beside her, rubbing his arm.

Tanna's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts as she hurried back to the rock wall.

# Chapter 16

The eagle flew off into the distance.

Zella's arms ached from the weight of the stretcher and Calen.

"I guess that's the way to go," Dover said.

"I suppose."

It would be a long trip. Finding the forgotten pit mine they were looking for without any paths or marked places would mean they could pass right by it, and not even know it.

The Grass Sea stretched endlessly before them. What secrets it hid, Zella didn't know, nor did she want to. Goddess Amber had forbidden them to leave their community when the now gen four adults were children. This trip could be by her design, as the villas were too large now for the land to support, or merely Blake's way of removing them from what he was hiding in Klapit.

Grass birds, rather like wild chickens, scattered at their feet. Grasshoppers jumped away. A group of ground cats chattered at them, lifted their tails, and then ran when Zella waved her hand at them.

If the animals of the Grass Sea were acting this normal, Goddess Amber hadn't awakened the Mad Gods. Perhaps this search was what they were supposed to do for the good of the villas.

Another march, and they rested near the creek. On one side of the creek, the Grass Sea stretched beyond sight. In the direction they were going, only a thin line of grass melted into sand. Squirrels chattered in the brushy overgrowth. One dropped a nut at her feet.

She picked it up and held it in her hands. Different from the nuts in the glades between the villas. It could be safe to eat, or not. Even if an animal could eat it safely, people might not be able to.

Dover reached for the nut. "I wish we better understood what Calen was trying to tell us."

"Will he wake up?" She handed it to him.

"The pain medicine I gave him is strong."

"We have to keep dragging him then." Zella rubbed her sore arms. Lumps were forming, much like hunter's arm lumps. Learning how to hunt and bring back meat would be the next logical step. One she didn't want to do.



Dover took her hands. "We don't have one of the ancestor's tools, animal or mechanical, to move him. We have to keep going." He dropped the nut in his gatherboard and rubbed her arms.

She rubbed his arms. A little relaxation in the warmth of early spring. Winter would come again soon, and the bones of arms would feel like the icicles that occasionally formed on unheated lodge ceilings. A drowsiness overtook her as her achy muscles relaxed.

A midafternoon sun beat down on the sand that stretched beyond a thin line of short grass. Pools of water appeared, and disappeared, across the desert in front of them. They planned to wait till the sun sank lower to cross it.

The desert clouded over.

Images appeared in the sand, fast approaching. Objects she didn't recognize, and couldn't put a name to. Moving shapes, larger than animals, though not alive, moved on the landscape in front of her. Strange loud booms like thunder. Voices spoke, and screamed in languages she didn't understand.

Zella sensed movement and motion as her mind travelled through this seeming maze of the unimaginable. She viewed it much as a watcher viewed a runner running away from the villa. They wore strange clothes, material like nothing she had ever seen. People sprawled on the ground at odd angles. Blood covered their bodies, and pooled on the sand around them.

Dover shook her shoulder.

She moaned as she pulled out of the dream. At first, she was unable to move, and gasped for breath. Her body felt icy even with the warm sunshine touching it.

He smiled and pulled her close. "What did you see?"

"Destruction. It reminds me of the gen four battle tales. It may be a bad dream, or a vision from the Goddess Amber. I'm not sure if it's a memory of the past, or vision of the future. I don't know any tales of strangers living within a day's walk of our villas."

"I don't either," Dover said. "Tell me what you saw."

Zella sat up and touched her gatherboard. The touch of something familiar was comforting.

"I want to know what you saw." Dover picked up more nuts and placed them in his gatherboard.

Zella described the dream. Even now, she felt the chill of the screams. Puddled blood shimmered and flowed. There was something else about the dream. There had been machines that moved. One had sent fire flying at the people on the ground. No wonder Goddess Amber had taken them away.

"How is Calen doing?"

Dover glanced in the direction of the stretcher. "He seems some better. He woke up."

Zella wondered why her vision bothered her so much. Something about it had to hold an answer. The sun was round. If only, they had something that round, they could find a way to push Calen along.

The thought sent shivers down her back. Goddess Amber had banned machines for the reason she had seen in the desert before her. People had used them to kill others, without reason, or knowing who they killed. Only a few crimes were worthy of death in Goddess Amber's way of living. Men who raped women, and their sponsored children, were almost the only people who were ever killed in the villas.

Dover held her close. He murmured, trying to calm her.

If the Goddess had sent her the dream, maybe she was supposed to use it. Maybe there was something here in the sand they could use, even if only temporarily. Empty desert extended on all sides, and in the direction they were supposed to go.

"Leave Calen here in the shade. My vision was trying to tell me something." Zella pulled away from his embrace.

"What are we looking for? We can't wander far."

She scrambled to her feet. "I'm not sure. I'll know it when I see it. Let's go."

Calen appeared okay, breathing easier.

Straight lines crossed the sandy soil. Oddly straight, with dark coloration in the ridges. Following the lines, she noticed the ground wasn't as level as it appeared. There were craters all around. With little circles on the ground, as if someone had thrown small rocks up and tossed them everywhere.

The set of tracks ended at one of these craters. Something about it was unnerving. Pieces of something stuck out of the sand.

She bent down to dig carefully with her hands. At first, all the

sand slid back in the hole. Her fingers felt something deep down, in the sand.

A gentle touch revealed an oddly familiar texture, that wasn't sharp. Tugging gently, she sat back on her heels. The item broke loose. She almost screamed when she recognized what she had pulled out of the sand. The bones of a human hand.

Dover sat beside her.

She turned to him.

"Keep digging. I'll try over here."

Zella reburied the hand bones, and moved over to try again. A piece of something else peeked through the surface. Her hands pulled the sand away. It was thick. As thick as her wrist was wide. It wouldn't come out with a gentle tug.

Dover helped her pull the sand away.

The artifact broke free of the swirling hot sand. A disk shape, as long as her elbow to her little finger. It had a hole in the middle, and four large holes around it, with a branch like framework holding it together. Little scraps of other artifacts had been attached across one side. She pulled and pushed on it. It felt sturdy enough.

"Dare we break the prohibition?"

"The dream, it gave you this?"

Zella held the item in her lap. "It's similar to what the machine moved on. It looks like the sun, with a hole cut out for the moon. All those people who died here, this place is haunted by their ghosts. I don't want to disturb their burial, like I did that hand."

"We can take it to push Calen along. We are being given a gift. We may never use it again, or we may. Leave that to the Goddess to decide."

"I wish we didn't have to. The damage done by these, and other things, was so great." Zella sighed.

"We have no idea what the Webbels have. We have to take what we are given to help ourselves, so they don't make the same mistakes our ancestors did."

Somehow, this round object was supposed to hold Calen's weight.

Perhaps they needed something else? Nothing in sight grabbed her attention. They hurried back to Calen.

His hiding spot in the brush was undisturbed by scouts or wild animals.

# Chapter 17

Tanna kept the horse and rider figure hid from Orid and the roamers while she worked. No one who knew about it spoke of it. She and Robin glanced at each other and smiled while planting.

Gel and Brix had left soon after dawn to run to Klapit and back. The day passed quickly. There had been no word from Jorn, or any of the other leaders.

Before long the regular garden area, and former horse lodge, would be planted. Tanna dug the last hole.

Robin helped her up.

Rusty had almost caught up with the planting.

Brix and Gel returned at the evening meal.

Gel swallowed the last drops in her water gourd as the sun's rays swept across the lodges. "No sign of any of the people of the villas in the pits. Vultures squawked, circled, and dived at the bison meat. We didn't even see or hear any dogs."

Brix dropped his huntboard. "It was eerie. A cloudless shadow stretched across the land."

"It was bustling when we left yesterday. Blake had requested the main villas to hunt for more bison. They left soon after we did. The pit miners should have remained. No sign of Zella, Dover, Varl, Vira, or even Calen." Gel glanced back toward the path to Klapit.

Gel's tale was disturbing. Zella wouldn't go with the hunters by choice. Without the council leaders, someone here had to make the decision. Orid and the roamers must be dealt with quickly, according to tradition. More than three days, and they had to be turned loose. They'd already spent one day.

Orid and his followers didn't throw mud in the water, or hide a new mother's baby blankets. These men had hurt people, and intended to kill them. No signs of remorse once they were caught either. Their crime against the villas was so great, no one here wanted to be responsible for the punishment of these men. This wasn't a dig leader's choice. Or, even a villa leader's decision. Only the whole council should have the right to decide what to do with Orid and the roamer scouts. Except that neither the whole council, a villa leader, nor, even a dig leader where anywhere to be found.

Only two apprentice dig leaders, the elderly, new mothers, and the young of four of the five villas.

A decision about the men would occur after the evening meal of leftover vegetables and rabbit stew. The normally tasty meal was coarse as sand in Tanna's mouth.

Someone had to begin the meeting. It had to be her, or Robin. Technically, they were the highest-ranking members available, even if many other villa members were older.

She glanced over at one of the young men feeding Orid. His throat was so badly tore up, that he might not live. All he could swallow was soup, not enough to build his strength. Maybe the wounds would fester and Goddess Amber would solve the problem for them. Life would be easier to wait, and let nature takes its course.

Robin touched her arm.

With his help, and a few other healers from Shims, that would not happen.

Grandmother sat beside Grandsponsor to help him eat the stew and soft vegetables. As the small children scrambled up from the meal, she motioned them back down. "Tanna, you and Robin should decide soon. What will you do?"

Tanna's voice trembled as she spoke. "Grandmother, I know my rank is higher than yours. I would give it up. To let you, with your knowledge, decide. I don't feel comfortable with these decisions."

Grandmother wiped her chin. "Would you give it up for life? What about the child yonder?" She nodded toward the boy that Uden held.

If Tanna adopted the child, and Rusty as her sister, they would gain Tanna's status. Tanna was used to her own plans, not what others told her to do. She knew the leader ways. If she gave them up now, and tried to lead later, the villa might not trust her.

Robin placed his hand on hers. "Your mom, and my sponsor, wouldn't want us to give up our future, not for this."

Tanna's face warmed as everyone watched her. "I don't want to make life and death decisions. This is no small crime. It's not even against one person, it's against everyone."

Grandmother smiled. "That is why you are the one to make it. You don't want to. It is occurring at Klapit. Imagine what your mother must be going through. What she is trying to find and fix."

Zella wouldn't like it any more than Tanna did. Her mom wouldn't avoid her duty.

"Tanna, don't make the ancestor's mistake. We already ignored the little warnings. They've built up. Don't let it go on. Do you want these men to be turned loose? Would you ever feel safe again?" Gel asked her.

Gel was right.

Robin, as a man, and a member of the Shims couldn't lead in this decision.

"I will if you want me to," he whispered.

Tanna gulped. She knew in her heart she had to lead. That was what Zella wanted her to do. Someday. Next trade maybe, not now. Not like this.

Orid smirked.

Apparently, he thought she didn't have the backbone to protect herself, and the rest of the villas. If he ever recovered, he would destroy her, like in the tales told around the fires.

"I will lead. I expect every member here to participate, even the small children." She glanced around the group huddled around the fire. "First, let us hear the men's reasons for what they did."

One of the scouts had seemed somewhat remorseful. Maybe begin with him. She picked up a stick and pointed to him. "State your name, and the crimes you are accused of."

The man gulped. He couldn't escape with tied feet.

Children stared at him.

Infants babbled.

He lowered his head and whispered. "No, please. Not in front of the children."

"You must. All here have witnessed your crimes and must be responsible for deciding your fate, with the help of the Goddess of course." Tanna's voice echoed off the villa walls.

The man looked down at his plate, as if he wished he could crawl into the piece of wood and hide.

"I am Orid's cousin, Fendon. I joined the group of men. We were not men then. The bad things I thought were silly, childish almost. I

never thought they would keep them up. They are worse now. I guess I thought they would outgrow bad behavior."

He leaned forward and glanced at several people, the young crippled boy in particular. "I am sorry. I never meant to hurt anyone. My life isn't worth this. No one's life is."

The boy spoke up. "He never treated me bad. He almost dropped me once. I think it was an accident. The others wanted to leave me to die."

"Did you harm any of the young women, or any other people?"

"I never harmed anyone. I saw them harm people. I was even there when they stampeded the bison. That seemed like fun. I wish I hadn't now," he said.

Grandmother grunted.

Grandsponsor glanced at the young man.

"I think stampeding the bison wasn't so bad." It may have saved us all. "Does anyone here have anything to add to this man's statement?"

No one said anything.

The formal words Jorn had used to declare one of the young hunters guilty of setting a lodge on fire the previous winter, would work well. Tanna looked at each face carefully to see if any were hiding opinions.

They all seemed content so far. "This man, Fendon, must pay for his association with these men. Do the people believe this man attempted to harm them?" If she didn't do the formality correctly, no one was commenting in front of Orid.

No one spoke or raised an arm.

"Do the people believe this man may have prevented injury, or death?"

The injured boy raised his arm, as did a few others.

Fendon may have been led to this group to keep their damage to a minimum.

Goddess Amber watched over them in every way she could. What should she do?

"Fendon, you owe an obligation. You will stay here, under the watchful eye of the grandmother and the grandsponsor. You will be expected to help them, and the boy, with their daily needs. At night, your feet will remain tied. During the day, you must be free to assist.

If you ever leave before your obligation is paid, may the Goddess find you first."

Fendon waited with his eyes closed. "How long is my obligation?"

Good question. "Until peace returns. Or the villas return and say your obligation is complete. Do any people protest this punishment?"

No one spoke up.

Orid smirked. He would try to show his innocence.

Tanna believed Fendon. Neither she, nor anyone else, would ever believe Orid. Eight more men to question before she reached him. She took a deep breath.

"You next." She pointed to the man beside Fendon.

He sneered. "Do you believe him? Fendon isn't his name. And I never did a thing."

"You lie!" Screamed one of the young women as she stood up. "You had your friend hold me down so you could hurt me."

Several other voices joined in, full of anger at the man. People jumped up and grabbing drumsticks.

"Enough!" Tanna tapped her stick on a drum.

"What is your name?"

"Does it matter? You've already decided my guilt, haven't you?" The man tried to lunge at her.

Gel and Brix grabbed the ropes tied around his legs, and pulled him back to a seated position.

"I think we can all hear his guilt. Does anyone declare him guiltless of attacks against women and children?"

No one spoke up, or said anything.

"Did anyone not see something this man has done?" She pointed the stick at each person as she looked them in the eye.

"I've only seen his sneer, and that is usually an indication of guilt." Robin looked at the ground.

Tanna sat back down. What could she do with him? What would the Goddess want? His crimes mounted against him. She had no memory of anyone with this many crimes. Could the ultimate price be expected? The grandmother would know.

The older woman's eyes were wet with tears. She knew this young man. He wasn't much older than Tanna herself.



"He is guilty." He had to die for his crimes. How, she had not decided. Maybe she could wait until all the men were tested. I'm not a killer. None of us are. In fact, Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims were the only ones in Almond who could hunt, or kill, besides Orid and his roamer scouts.

Robin had to fight to save lives, not take them. He could never be a full leader because of that.

She needed his strength now, to help her through this. He might no longer care for her, because she had to do what was best for the people. A tear slipped down her cheek. Once begun, the meeting had to continue.

The outbursts of each man were similar. Many she had never seen before, not even at a trade meeting. All of these men had caused serious damage, and potentially death. If they had caused one of these women to become pregnant against their will, that child would have to die at birth. It was the law. No one could raise a rattler child. It harmed the mother, the child, and those around them far too much.

Tanna watched the group carefully as she went along. As she reached Orid, last and leader, tears appeared in Uden's eyes.

"Orid, are you the leader of these roamers?"

"Never," he croaked.

"The Goddess will punish those who lie."

He looked away.

"He can talk," Robin said. "Though I wouldn't recommend it for long."

Orid refused to look at her, or any other person.

Tanna spoke to the group. "Is there anyone here who finds Orid innocent?"

No sound. Not even an infant's cries.

With luck, memory of Jorn's formal words would not fail her now. "All people here, and Goddess Amber, find Orid guilty of the most unspeakable crimes. Holding people captive and treating them as objects. Forcing people to do things they otherwise would not do. Of rape and attempted murder, among other unknown and unspeakable crimes. A punishment must now be set for these men."

"And how are you not holding people against their will?" One of the convicted asked.

Tanna knew this question would come up. As it should. She smiled.

The man grinned. He thought he had caught her breaking the laws. Almost. They had almost let this meeting wait longer than the law allowed. "We do have the right to hold you captive. You have harmed all of us, not only one of us. We must hold you to protect people, and you yourself, from your evil."

The grandmother spoke up. "Once, our ancestors believed that everyone could recover and no longer hurt people. We have tried to learn from them. Some recover, if they have caused minor hurts to themselves, or others. Those who have caused major hurts rarely change. We cannot take the chance. Peace is too valuable. Without peace, we all die."

Orid tried to laugh. "Old woman, we are the peace keepers. Do what we say, and have all the peace you want."

The gen four grandmother smiled. "Orid, you do not know what peace is. Your spirit was damaged. Perhaps there were people a gen or two back who didn't do what they should have. People felt sorry for them."

The old woman looked directly at Uden.

Uden hugged her baby to her.

"Orid is a rattler, much as Blake is. Both mothers begged for them to be allowed to live as infants. Then, as each child grew to appear more like the roamer who attacked them, both mothers grew to despise the child they kept, and push them further away. Everyone knew Blake was, and ignored him. No one wanted either boy. Both grew into strong men, full of anger, fear of abandonment, lacking self-respect, and self-care."

"Some can succeed," Uden spoke softly. "Please."

"Child, please give her up. Send her to a villa no one knows. Orid is her sponsor, isn't he?" The Grandmother leaned toward her.

Uden looked at the ground.

"With his blood, the child will be like that someday. Do you want to be in my place one day?"

"Orid isn't your child," Uden said.

"No. And neither is Blake. However, another who they may trust is. While that child was not as a child begun by these men, he wasn't a child I would now choose to have. Thankfully, his sponsor died in a hunting accident, while that son was quite young."

Who did she mean?

"I chose to do the next best thing, and adopted him out. I am not even sure he knows he was adopted. We will see."

"Wouldn't not telling him be a lie?" Tanna asked.

"I see that now. I knew the ancestors asked us to never adopt a child and not tell them. I didn't want to see that baby die. And I didn't want him to know why I didn't want him. I thought I could watch him grow up, and all would be fine." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"We can't change the past," Fendon said. "Even I can't change mine. And I would. What are you going to have me do to my former friends, that I now wish I had abandoned?"

Of course. She could require Fendon to kill them.

If he learned to kill his friends. She shivered at the thought.

Rusty reached over and grabbed her sleeve. "Mushrooms. I have some."

That was a good answer. No violence. Too bad they couldn't trust the men to dig their own graves. Goddess Amber must be appeased.

"Do you have enough?"

Rusty nodded.

Tanna handed them to Robin. "Robin, will these work?"

"Yes. How will you give them to the men?"

Robin was right. The men would refuse to eat them. And even if she did, or could, would she want herself, or others, to know how to prepare such a mixture?

The sun was sinking on the horizon.

Orid and his men laughed and sneered. They knew she wasn't able to kill them. She would have to let them go.

Tanna bent forward as the grandmother moved her lips. The statue inside her tunic pressed against her chest.

She had an idea. Only the Goddess could answer her prayers now.

# Chapter 18

Short grass gradually reclaimed the desert. The ends of Calen's stretcher fitted well into the larger holes of the disk. It slid easily across the sand, leaving an odd track behind them. Once they reached an area where actual soil covered the sand, the disk under the stretcher grabbed at the clumps of grass. Reaching the grass meant they could hide their tracks from any scouts Blake might have sent to follow them.

Zella was ready to rest. They stopped to stretch their arms and release the strain. No one knew where they were going.

Another march and they reached a tangled undergrowth next to a small stream.

"Cross and then camp." Zella said.

"We can drag the stretcher through the middle for a ways so it will be more difficult to track us." Dover pushed back into the undergrowth and pulled branches down to hide their tracks.

She uncovered Calen's face.

He smiled at her, barely moving. The leaf mat protected his face from sunburn, and let him sleep while they walked. Recovering from overheating could take many days. Days they didn't have.

Dover attached a branch to the rear of the stretcher.

She picked up her side of the stretcher, and walked toward the creek. It might not float if the water were deep, and she didn't have a plan for that.

Zella splashed a little as she crossed the creek. It wasn't much of one. Before the other bank, she and Dover turned north and followed it the length of two lodges before choosing a place to climb out of the water.

The stretcher caught on a clump of grass.

Calen moaned and his head rolled.

A nearby clump of trees would be a good spot to leave him to rest while they checked the location. No sign of ants, or rodent holes nearby. They might not be anywhere near the pit they were looking for. Regardless, her arms could pull the stretcher no further tonight. As she sat it down, her muscles leaped and jerked in protest.

Somewhere out west Vira, Varl, Sharel, and Nala were looking for a pit to mine as well. If both groups found one, which one would the community move to?

Leaves from the brush would keep the evening sun out of Calen's eyes. He blinked at her.

Her gatherboard had slipped as she sat the stretcher down. She pulled it back onto her shoulder. "Dover and I will walk a little ways. Not far, we want to check beyond the brush."

He grimaced. The stretcher poles, against his bare skin, had to be rubbing him raw. There was nothing else they could do.

She turned and pushed her way through the brush.

After breaking their way through tangled vegetation that no humans had stumbled through, they reached trees and flowers in a small glade. She tripped over something not quite visible in the dirt. It looked like sand. Her foot had struck it hard, and the sand hadn't shifted. She rubbed it with her hand. Yes, it felt like sand. Like dried wet sand.

"Dover, look at this."

He stumbled over, looked at it, and felt it. "Something the ancestors made. Not sure how they made that."

"Let's keep exploring. Look there is more over there!"

She tripped over more of the sand rock. Blood trickled from her knee. Whatever it was, it had fallen long ago, and it had sharp edges that could cut.

"Wait," Dover said. "Let's see if Calen can walk this far. It's shady, and it might be good for him."

"Okay." Trudging back through the tangled growth, they broke more branches.

Moving Calen was difficult. He was able to walk a little distance, holding on to both of them. About half-way through the tangled mess, his feet began to drag and they pulled and pushed him along. They left him near the first stone they had seen.

"You'll be okay?" She asked him.

"Water."

With her help, he drank from his water gourd.

Dover pushed back through the underbrush with Calen's huntboard. "I tried to make it look natural back there. We'll be safer away from the stream."

They made Calen as comfortable as they could. Not that there was any comfort here without a lodge and a fire.

"I'm going down the stream to search for rabbit or nutria." Dover nodded to her as he picked up his gatherboard.

She waved to him, and then crept through the undergrowth. A small area between those unusual sand rocks looked perfect for digging. Zella cut through some growth, and set it aside for a fire later.

A long sand rock tilted under the thin layer of soil. As she moved left to right, back and forth, it wouldn't move. At least they would have a dry place to build a fire to cook.

Zella moved further down the glade. Bits of sand rock stuck up at odd angles. She tried to dig between them. The top layer of brush had been cleared from a sleeping area sized part of the glade when Dover returned.

"Here's dinner. I'll cook. Have you found anything?"

"A good place to cook over there." Zella pointed to the cleared space by their gatherboards. "I'll look for greens we can eat."

"Do you think we will find anything here?" Dover sat the rabbits down on the rock and walked to where she was. His hair was framed by the late evening sun.

"Not sure. Maybe this was an old building. We have to try." Her foot slid on a moss-covered rock.

"Let's clean up after dinner. Don't dig too long."

Zella watched him walk back to skin the rabbits. He was as perfect a man as she could ever have dreamed of. The hurt from when her son died, the one she knew he sponsored, welled up stronger than ever.

She bent back over and pushed her trowel into the loose earth. It hit something spongy. The sponginess was familiar, so she didn't push the trowel harder. Excited, and shaking, she quickly loosened the soil for a hand width around the spot. Then she dug as quickly as she could, trying to feel for the edges of the item.

The top was dirt encased. A little longer and wider than her hand. Short, it was not a finger's length deep. She slowly pulled it out of the ground. She tried to determine what was dirt, and what wasn't.

"What is it?" Dover sat beside her.

"Could it be?" Zella whispered. She put her fingers to the right side and let the bottom fall. The top stayed in her left hand attached, as the right side fell a few hand widths. She took a deep breath and stared upwards into Dover's eyes.

"It survived so well for so long."

"Maybe they don't have much rain here. Those sand rocks sheltered it. Maybe they sheltered it more before they fell," he said.

"If it was a building, and only fell a gen ago, that might be so." She placed the item in her lap, and opened it again. Written items were rare. Most had long rotted away, before even the grandmothers of her own gen were grown. Children learned to write a few words in the sandy beaches during the summer, as a game. Written pottery could be found in the pit mines.

Zella carefully turned the leaf to a water damaged picture of a plant. Letters covered part of it, making it difficult to see what the plant was. Perhaps the purpose had once been to explain what plants to use for medical reasons, or food. She turned a few more pages and saw animals. Several she recognized, and several she didn't. Water and bugs had damaged many pages beyond recognition.

Several pages of people, in different clothes than she had ever seen appeared. She wondered how there could ever have been so many different people. Could they have had so many different shades of skin and hair? How were all those different clothes made? Some were so bundled up; they would boil alive during the summer if they dressed that way.

She handed the picture book to Dover. "No idea. Let's keep it and preserve it. Maybe someday we will know what the ancestors were trying to tell us."

"Do you think they saved more here?"

Zella sighed. "If they are all damaged, or pictures only, they won't be helpful to daily living. It would be fun to dig them out and look at them. There is a lot of this sand rock around to protect these artifacts."

"The rabbits are ready to cook," Dover said. "We need to talk to Calen about what to do next."

Dover hid the artifact back under the sandy rock where she had found it. It was safer there for now, anyway.

Zella followed Dover to help bring Calen to the sand rock to prepare their meager meal.

She picked a few leaves and hoped they found more to eat. There hadn't been much food to bring in their gatherboards.



# Chapter 19

"The Goddess will decide if any of the rest of you are innocent, as you so proclaim," Tanna said directly to Orid.

Orid wouldn't expect her to remember the vagaries of the law. "You have to release us. You've had your chance."

She smiled. He was trying to escape to attack them again. "No. We have two more days."

The horse figure pressed against her chest as she leaned forward.

"One day is given when waiting on the leaders to return, and when waiting on the Goddess to decide."

Tanna signaled Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims. "You six will go now, and look for a herd of horses. Take most of the dogs with you. When you find the horses, return to let us know the path the men must take. The dogs will stampede the horses. The Goddess will save any who are truly innocent."

"Fendon, you will bear witness to the fact that your former friends will be tried beyond our fire. As the animals stampeded, no one will be expected to watch. It is not our decision to make."

The six hunters grabbed their weapons, called their dogs, and strode off into the distance. She waved Logan and Kol to follow them. It would be a long night. They had to wait until the Goddess was ready to determine the fate of these men.

Later, in the treasury, Tanna cuddled up to Robin. "I hope you understand. It has to be done."

He reached across her. "Yes it does. My villa can't make death decisions. We can only save lives. That is why we are both the highest, and lowest, rank. Enough isn't enough. Shims know too many ways to abuse the gift of life given to us."

"You didn't say anything when I decided what to do." Tanna rolled back into his chest.

"Of course not." Robin chuckled. "I know what Orid and his roamer scouts are like. You are letting the Goddess decide anyway."

Tanna drifted, almost asleep, and remembered something. "What about Uden? Grandmother said bad things happen when rattlers live."

Robin grunted. "Right now she wants Corandra. It's too late to let the baby die the way it should have. And if we force her, Rusty's baby brother may die too."

"Grandmother said Blake was wanted as an infant too. Then, later his mother changed her mind."

"We need to be sure Orid cannot hurt anyone else. After that, we have to find Zella, and Dover."

Tanna snuggled closer to Robin. "What would happen if you went against your villa teachings?"

His body stiffened against hers. "You mean if I killed someone? Or let them die? I don't know. Most who have tried to kill someone, or ended up in that position, have died soon thereafter. Even mothers in our villa who have to allow infants to die rarely live much longer than the baby does. After an attack, they will take poison early in pregnancy. That way they don't have to see, or kill, the infant."

"Is that what you gave her?"

"She knew what it was, and what it does."

"Did you give that to me last fall?"

"I felt it was best. I didn't want you hurt."

"I don't want you to die. Will the Shims villa members be in danger with this solution?"

He held her close. "I don't think so. They only are helping drive the horses. They are hunters."

Robin paused before he continued. "If these deaths will prevent many more, of all their friends and family, most will recognize their part in saving lives, not ending them. They understand. One glance at that barely gen two woman those scouts raped, and they accepted what has to happen."

His hands touched her side gently, not pressing for anything. With their bodies pressed close she drifted into sleep.

Tanna skimmed above the grasses on the plain. Leading her villa to a new place. The person riding beside her poked her in the foot with a stick.

The rider didn't have a stick.

Her foot was poked again.

Her eyes opened.

Gel stood over Tanna with her spear in hand.

Tanna cringed and covered her face with her arms.

"Sorry it's so early. A horse herd has been sighted. The hunters and dogs will herd it this way shortly after dawn. We need to move Orid and the roamers out to where they will run."

Tanna yawned and stretched. "Guess I need to wake up the rest of the villa. We will need all of their help. The roamer scouts have to be moved safely. They can't have their hands or feet free."

"We can put four together and tie the legs of one to the other in a line. They can stumble along like that to where we need them to go. The men can't escape before spears catch them," Gel said.

Tanna shuddered at the thought of having to throw a spear at a person. The threat of a spear would scare these men, who obviously weren't afraid to spear a person.

Gel hurried out of the treasury, not completely closing the windsun.

Robin reached over and touched her shoulder. "How do you feel about this whole thing?"

Tanna rolled over and tears slipped onto his shoulder.

Those roamers must never see her cry, or red eyed. "I don't like it. I don't want them to hurt anyone else, or me again. I can't stand the thought of having to make the final decision. I am glad we are leaving it up to the Goddess in a way that shows we are trying to do what is right. We have to hurry."

He rubbed her shoulder. "It won't be an easy day for anyone. Wake the others gently."

"What about Uden? I don't feel I can make that decision as long as Jorn and Zella are alive."

"We don't know if they are," Robin said.

Tanna wiped away a hot tear. "They have to be. We need the council."

"We can leave that up to the Goddess as well, for now." Robin pulled himself up, and rolled up his sleeping mat.

During the night, the roamers had been tied to trees nearby. Bugs and ants had crawled on them and bit them.

Robin checked each complaint out. "Yes, you all have ant bites, and a spider bite or two. Compared to your crimes, those are nothing. You can all walk."

"How can I walk from where that spider bit me? My legs will rub that bite constantly." One of the roamers grumbled and tried to adjust his weight off the spider bite with his tied hands.

"Scratching will relieve the pain of the bite," Robin said.

"If I scratch, it will irritate it more, and make it crack open and bleed. I won't be able to walk by tomorrow."

"We will worry about tomorrow, if you are alive."

Robin turned his head to hide a smile. "At least one of them will die by spider bite if nothing else," he whispered.

If only there were another way. These roamers would kill her and everyone in all four villas if they ever escaped and she knew it. As she tied the men's legs together, she listened to them talk.

They bragged about what they had done to the women and children. One even said that Rusty was too old to be any fun anymore.

Tanna shuddered. Her resolve hardened, though she did not relish the scene she was about to create.

Gel and Robin helped the men stand.

Fendon and Robin would carry Orid.

Gel would help her to lead the grandsponsor to the plains. He wanted to see the Goddess's decision. He was too weak to walk there himself.

Representatives of the villas walked with them. One new mother, and most of the infants, stayed behind.

Uden carried Corandra. She hadn't left her baby alone since last night.

"Here." Gel pointed to an open spot where the grass had been eaten down by herds.

The place was beyond sight of Almond villa. With the stumbling roamers, and four people carrying two men, it took at least twice as long as the normal half march from the villa walls.

Gel helped her set the gen four grandsponsor down near some brush, and the gen four grandmother sat beside him.

Orid and his roamers were led further into the field. Fendon and Robin put Orid on the ground and left him there. Then they made the other men lay down, four on each side of him.

They taunted Tanna.

"You won't do it."

"I don't see any horses."

"You can't leave us here to be eaten by fiery ants."

"We'll escape, and you'll be first!"

Fendon stood beside her. He walked forward, halfway between her and the men on the ground.

Grasses waved in the distance. The ground rumbled.

The horse herd thundered through the brush, and down the hill.

She stood between the villas and the men, outside of the runway for the horses. Her spear held high and waved in the breeze. None of the scouts could escape. The horse figure pressed against her not so flat chest.

The rest of the people turned back, unable to watch. They would peek back.

Tanna must appear to be watching, as they would expect.

The men screamed in terror, and tried to escape as the herd flowed across the plain.

Most horses shied away from people. These would have dogs on both sides and behind.

No escape.

## Chapter 20

Zella dished out the rabbit stew. Not as good as day long simmered nutria stew smothered in herbs and greens. It would do for tonight.

She handed a gourd full to Calen.

It wouldn't do any good to start the conversation too soon. Best to eat and nourish the body and mind. Memories of Tanna and trips to recover hidden herb gardens flittered about as she ate. Her daughter knew the healthy herbs. Robin knew the healthy and dangerous ones. Uden was the unknown. Even though she had willingly gone back with them, that was almost unnatural for a woman to choose to travel alone. Particularly one who wasn't a dig leader or runner.

"We didn't tell them which villa to go to," Zella said.

"Robin will stay with them."

"I don't want to look for the missing pit mine. Alone, we may never find it. We can't dig and hunt. Let's go back to Klapit and say we didn't find it." At least then, they could drop off Calen, and search for Tanna and Robin at the other villas.

Calen's brow furrowed as he ate. "I have no idea where to go next."

"Do you think we should go further and search more, or turn back?" Dover said.

"Neither seems right." Calen leaned against the tree behind him.

No, it didn't. Finding Tanna was all that seemed right. How had her own mother ever abandoned her and Jorn? Thinking of Tanna alone without the protection of her villa was more than Zella could stand.

"I'm not sure we can, or should, go back," Calen said.

If Calen was afraid, there really was something to fear.

Zella pulled rabbit meat off a leg bone. "What do you know about Webbel that you can tell us?"

His hands trembled and fell to his lap. "Not good things, that's for sure. I don't know much. I think Blake didn't trust me since." Calen's words drifted and his eyes closed.

"Since what Calen?" The rabbit bones rattled in her lap.

He sat back. "Since I asked him why he treated that woman so bad. Why he let the roamers attack her."

"What woman?" An icy chill gripped her heart. Women were valued leaders; and would never allow a man to hurt them.

"She was a woman of high standing in her villa, far away. Blake brought them to Webbel."

"What?" Dover leaned forward. "Why did no one tell us?"

"I'm sorry. Blake watched me like a hawk, and I never had a chance to share the knowledge. He didn't want anyone to know. I thought everyone knew, and didn't speak of them. He said he brought them to help all of us." Calen threw a chunk of gristly rabbit meat. It bounced off a tree.

"Secrets would wake Goddess Amber even more than being overcrowded." Zella shook her head.

A mouse skittered across the far end of the clearing chased by a small fox.

"I know. The woman chose a man of high standing from another villa, Mills, that found Blake to trade with. I think she died." He lowered his eyes. Two tears fell into his hands clasping the rabbit chunks.

He threw the pieces of meat. "I think she died. She was so pretty. What did the roamers do to her children? I haven't seen them for days." Calen held his hands to his eyes and cried.

"What children?" Dover reached over to comfort the crying man.

In between sobs, Calen blurted out, "A beautiful little girl, and a baby. I don't know its gender. It was too young to even be named."

Zella and Dover stared at each other. Could it be?

"Blake told her the man she chose was dead. It's likely she died then too." Calen's gourd slipped out of his grasp.

Zella covered her mouth to hide the gasp. Dover's hands shook. "Was he dead?"

"No. Held captive," Calen said.

"Why?" Dover asked.

"Control of the wind energy, and light sources, the man brought from his distant villa. Blake didn't care about the beautiful woman, or her children. He didn't care about women."

"What about his own mother?" Zella asked.

"She never wanted him. He was a rattler. His mother knew the law, and said she wanted him. She grew to ignore him when her other children were born."

"Now we all suffer the result," Dover said.

Calen wiped away the tears. "He's not all bad. Though, he won't stop bad things from happening. I don't want to go back. They might lock me up too. I'd die. I don't care where we go. Maybe we can go to Mills for help and then rescue Emory and find the children he sponsored."

"Blake sent you with us," Zella said.

"Yes. He and the roamers wanted me to kill you. Or, slow you down and let the lions kill you. I can't do that."

A crow cawed in the distance.

"Not intentionally anyway. Sorry about the sun sickness."

"Who all knows about what Blake is doing?" Dover asked.

"It's difficult to say. Most of Webbel, especially the men. They like the freedom Blake gives them," Calen said.

"I didn't see any women from Webbel," Zella said.

"You won't," Calen said. "I don't know what he is thinking. Without women, he has no children to sponsor. Without children, he has no one to look after him when he is gen four, and that's not far off. The whole villa will die, and Goddess Amber will be vindicated."

"That's not the way to follow her laws," Zella said. "All these unknown people, what are they doing?"

"Blake doesn't care what the roamers, and the other villas do, as long as they dig and search for something. No one knows what."

"Anyone in other villas who follow him?" Dover leaned forward.

"A few perhaps. I can't be sure who all. Some may know more than others do. I'm not sure how many he trusts with what information. I think several people know something is different."

A rat raced to grab the meat Calen had thrown. After picking it up, the rat glanced at them, before racing off into the underbrush.

The wild animals here had no fear of humans. That was both good and bad. They wouldn't warn them if roamers had followed them.

"What about Varl, Vira, Sharel, and Nala?" Zella stirred the remaining stew.



"He has many, many roamer scouts who have joined Webbel hidden away. Ten were sent to follow the other dig leaders. They were hidden away from camp," Calen said.

Zella gasped. "I hope they survived."

Calen grunted. "Oh the women may be alive. The roamers have a bad habit of not killing the women. They keep them for other things, hidden in dug out rooms, with little food, and no light."

"Why don't they leave?" Dover asked.

"They can't leave. Only way in and out is a ladder that is pulled up when the entry in the ground is shut. They drag a hide of dirt across the entry, to keep the sunlight from creeping through," Calen said.

"The women wouldn't have much air then," Dover said.

"I know," Calen said. "That's the way the roamers like them. Like the bad ancestors of old. They have a few small air holes, prairie dog hole sized. They made me go with them on one of the visits to the hidden places. Entombed. More dead than alive. I wouldn't join them in their games." He shuddered at the memory and held his hands.

Zella shivered at the thought of what the roamers were doing to women. Tanna and Robin were in danger.

"I couldn't help them escape. Too many roamers." His tears flowed freely.

"Do you remember where these places are?" Zella asked.

"I know where a few of the pits are. I hoped someday to be able to rescue the women. I never had the chance." He clenched his fists and stared at the sky. "That's how they kept those two men in the stone lodge." Zella said.

Calen relaxed. "I thought you knew. I guess I wanted you to. I was sure you saw the light."

"How does it work?" Captured light would be useful during winter's often dark nights. Especially during a baby's birth.

"A special non-vegetable gourd. I can use them, no idea how to make them."

"And the villa leaders?" Dover asked. His hand clasped Zella's.

"I wish I knew. Most of Webbel stay as far away from Blake and the roamers as possible. I know he has offered them knowledge

about things they want. Blake hasn't told them what they have to do in exchange for that knowledge. I hope they never find out."

"I hope not as well," Zella said. "I fear they may know already."

"Especially Robin and Tanna, if they ever made it back."

Zella gasped. "What do you know?"

"I don't know much. I heard Blake laugh when Orid said he had a plan for those left in the villas. When Tanna and Robin didn't show up with you two, I couldn't say anything."

"We should go at once!" Zella screamed.

"No," Calen said. "It was already too late when you arrived. Even with Blake's secrets, I couldn't guarantee your safety. That's why I told Jorn to send back as many as he could."

"Can those three be trusted?" Zella said.

"I hope so." Calen said.

"Maybe the Goddess will give us an answer," Dover said.

The moon rose on three silent adults. What the men were thinking, Zella didn't know. They had to do something in the morning. Dover had said Calen couldn't travel until morning. Realistically, neither could she. Her arms ached from pulling the stretcher all day.

# Chapter 21

A breeze gently pushed and pulled on Tanna.

The roamer scouts screamed and scrambled. Their legs tied together, and arms tied behind their backs, they tripped and fumbled.

"Don't leave us here to die!"

"We won't do it again!"

Tanna almost relented.

Fendon stood strong with his fists clenched by his sides. His face contorted and turned away with his eyes closed.

Orid's yelled, "She won't let it happen. She's too weak. When we're loose."

The men's faces paled as the horses thundered across the plains.

Fendon faced the stampede.

A large herd of swift horses thundered toward the scouts.

Barking dogs squeezed the horses closer together, into a thin line.

Tanna closed her eyes.

Trumpeting horses drowned out the men's screams.

Her shawl flapped wildly against her leg. She wished she could ride the wind away from this scene of death and destruction. The swift wind of the horses passing almost pulled her along.

The horse's breath was strong. Mud and sweat poured off their backs.

Their ancestors had valued the horse. They had lost horses because of the thrill.

The sound of the horses died down as they whisked on across the plain. Her eyes opened.

Kol and Logan sat beside her, panting after their run.

Fendon dropped to the ground and breathed heavily.

Tanna bent over and reached down to pat the dogs, knowing they had worked hard today. Their training had done the work that needed to be done.

People pressed around her. They wanted to see what was left of the field. One person gasped.

Robin's hand rested on her shoulder.

She had to look, and didn't want to.

Tall grass was trampled.

The hunters who had followed the horse herd panted in the distance.

Parts of the men's bodies were scattered about the ground. Arms and legs not attached to trunks. Skulls busted, brains spilled on the ground. They would be left to the wolves, lions, and vultures. Hopefully, their evil would be separated and consumed, and hurt the community of villas no more.

It wasn't the bloody pieces of human flesh the people gaped at.

No roamer was left alive of the nine placed out to die. The Goddess had allowed the community to rid themselves of danger.

Two horses remained, standing quietly, waiting.

Tanna stepped closer. Perhaps they were an illusion. A shattered skull lay not far from her. Brain matter glistened on the dewy grass. Blood splashed everywhere, hopefully only from the roamers, and no horse had been hurt.

She shuddered.

The horses weren't babies separated from their mother.

Something about one of them was familiar.

A gasp behind her startled her.

The gen four grandmother was in the arms of two Almond women.

The statue pressed against her chest. Tanna pulled it out and stared.

The resemblance was remarkable. This horse could have belonged to the grandmother, from two, or was it three, generations ago. Horses don't live that long. Could it have retained some memory of being tame? The grandmother's horse must have escaped the massacre generations ago.

As she came closer, the horse pawed the ground, and snorted. It didn't appear injured. "Spirit horse, it is okay, I will take you to your friend, please come."

She reached a tentative hand forward.

The horse reared and neighed.

"Come." Tanna turned and walked back to the grandmother.

It snorted as it followed her.

She reached Robin and kept walking, hoping the horse would follow.

He took her hand, turned, and smiled at her.

She walked.

The gen four grandmother cried and reached her hands out to touch the horse. It snorted, and pawed the ground. "Sandy, my Sandy, will there peace at last? I never meant for you to be hurt. You mustn't have been if you are here."

"How long do horses live?" Tanna asked.

The grandmother rubbed the horse's neck. "About a generation, or less. By one of our gens, they are very old."

The woman looked at the animal closely. "This animal, if my watery eyes don't deceive me, is about half a person's gen, and the one following her may be her daughter, about half her age. Perhaps they have some memory of people who were kind to them."

"Perhaps Goddess Amber gave them to us. Will they stay with us of their own choice?" Tanna asked.

The grandmother smiled and wiped her eyes. "I hope so. Perhaps not, though. We could build the horse lodge back."

Then she lowered her head. "No, I guess not, the new garden was planted there."

"Grandmother, lean against your friend. Let's walk back to the villa. Maybe the horses were given to us for a reason. A new horse lodge can be built next to your cow lodge." Tanna reached out to take her hand.

The gen four grandmother took her hand, and leaned against the horse.

Sandy nuzzled the top of her head.

People walked back to Almond without the burden of the roamers who had harmed them. They had received two gifts in return for preventing future harm to their villas.

Robin's arm was around Tanna's waist. She turned to smile at him and saw Uden talking to Fendon.

Fendon reached out to Corandra. As he touched the infant's hand, she squealed.

Corandra had been a normal infant. Now, she acted as if Fendon were her sponsor. Life would be easier on her if he had

been. The people here would not forget that Uden admitted to Corandra being a rattler child.

Perhaps girl children were different from boys if raised by their mother. Possibly less likely to look like their mother's attacker. Obviously, boy children could turn out evil, carrying the evil of their creation throughout their lives. People shunned them, and expected them to be evil. Maybe it wasn't only expectation.

Grandmother had said something about another rattler child who grew up without knowing its mother. Who was that child, and how had she, or he, turned out?

As they entered the wall opening, Tanna and Robin slipped behind the gen four grandmother walking beside the horse.

A sight she had only dreamed of, a human touching a horse as they did a dog or a chicken. Sandy, as the grandmother had called her, did not act surprised at being touched. Though she and her offspring shied from the other members of the villa.

Even the young children gave them plenty of room. They had seen what damage horse's hooves could do.

Tanna squeezed Robin's hand and smiled. They had completed one dreadful task. Now though, their troubles had only begun. Someone would come searching for Orid and his friends.

The villa of Almond, now a combination of Almond, Shims, Lava, and Tuttle, must be protected.

## Chapter 22

Zella woke to the stars shining with a faint glow on the horizon. She wasn't sure how much of Calen's tale was true, and how much was an attempt to convince them to trust him.

Calen should be able to walk today.

After a more thorough search, she and Dover would decide if they should try to dig for a pit mine at this location, or travel on.

Wolves howled in the distance. The eerie sound broke the stillness of pre-dawn. Would she ever find peace and comfort again? Her spine tingled as a wolf howl sounded even closer to their camp.

Reaching over she woke Dover up. "Wolves, close."

"We will go soon," he mumbled, half asleep.

"What about Calen?"

"He has to go with us. We can't leave him here, for his safety, or ours."

Distrust and secrets. Like dry dirt and sand she had swallowed as a child. Two things she had avoided as much as possible her whole life, and now she had to face the secrets of others, and the distrust they had created.

The sunrise was colorful, yellows, and pinks and fluffy white around the edges. No red, thankfully. The storm season would be here soon.

After a quick breakfast of leftover rabbit, Zella and Dover lifted their gatherboards onto their backs.

"We won't go far today, Calen. Then we have to decide. You have to walk today." Zella waited.

His face showed no reaction. "I think I can make it. A ways at least. I can try. I never thought staying in one place and doing the easy work Blake wanted me doing would be such a bad decision."

Calen picked up his huntboard, which had been lightened after he fell ill. They trudged carefully though the tumbled sandy rocks.

At the edge of the brush and rocks, Zella held up her hand to wait before they stepped out onto the open plain. It was always best to view their position and be sure no lions were around.

Glancing as far as she could see, there was little obviously visible in this clearing. Rocks littered the ground, like what they

occasionally found in some of the lower digging levels at Klapit. They were reddish rectangles, almost the length of her forearm, and double that width. Many were broken.

Small animal trails wove through the grass stems. Mice, moles, and rabbits had made their paths, trails, and homes among the scattered rocks. A few rabbits peeked out at them as they passed.

A brushy pile loomed over the grass in the distance.

They would dig nearby and rest in the shade during midday. It would be too hot to work then. Rest would be good. If they found something, they could return to Klapit. If they didn't, they could go somewhere else.

A scan through and around the brush showed no sign of wolves or lions recently using it. Bison, horses, or camels had avoided it as well. This spot must be off their migratory path.

She opened her gatherboard to reach for her digging tool.

"Can I help you dig?" Calen said. "I want to do something."

Zella wasn't sure if that was a good idea. After all, he might find something and hide it from them.

"I think it would be okay," Dover said. "You work over here in the shade, and don't overdo. It's a good way to test your strength."

Calen went to the slightly shady rise Dover had indicated.

Nothing on the ground grabbed Zella's attention. It didn't look like much. Good digging places rarely did. The gen four grandmothers gossiped about when items stuck out of the ground, and digging there was always worthwhile. They hadn't found any places like that in over a gen.

One of the now dead grandmothers had mentioned maps with directions to all the potential pit mines. She claimed to have seen it as a child in the hand of a roamer. Though how such a map could have been made, or read, no one living could guess. Uden's mother, Odalen might have known. After she had died, Uden had been sent to Webbel to learn from their clay designer.

There were the rectangular rocks, like the ones near Klapit, on the other side of the clearing. Maybe something good would come of this place.

Her digging tool slowly shifted the dirt. Past and future. Going back to Klapit was dangerous. Finding Varl, Vira, and their



daughters was an unlikely adventure as well. Calen was the only one who might know where they might be, if they were alive.

Warm, salty tears slid down her cheek. Tanna and Robin's safety mattered most. If they made it to Lava, there would be only fourteen people. Only a few adults, and most of those past fighting age. There might be five able-bodied adults against Orid, and who knew how many scouts.

"Dover we have to go back."

"There is no telling what Jorn, Quan, Marin, and Irvin have decided. They may have gone to the villas."

"They may have fallen under Blake's shadow," Zella said.

"Perhaps, if they aren't sure what they should be doing," Dover said.

"I wouldn't want to be making their decisions. Ours are tough enough." Zella's tool hit something spongy. I could be an old newspaper. Another unstable artifact that no one living knew how to make.

Left on the ground, they rotted away in days. Buried underground, they could survive indefinitely, leaving her a record of life as it once was. They were rarely shown to the villas. Newspapers would quickly crumble to dust. Usually she, or another dig leader, read them quickly, and then reburied them so that another gen could read the tales.

That is, if future gens read. So few had any interest in learning what the letter games meant anymore. Most couldn't even spell their own names. How was a name like Corandra to be spelled in letters anyway? Letter pronunciation were so different than daily speech.

Zella dug to about the same depth at about the size she expected the paper to be. She gently pushed more dirt aside with her hands. It wasn't the kind of paper she expected. The paper was more like what they had found last night. Except it wasn't as tough, and might not last long. She picked it up and turned the pages.

She picked out the symbols, and read slowly, bit by bit. The words didn't make much sense at first, in and of themselves. They were words and sentences. They didn't have a beginning or an end. Closing it back, she read from the first page. Some pages were missing. She thumbed the pages, not reading. The layout was

different. This wasn't a summary, like newspapers, or the segments and picture book from yesterday.

This was something else. It had to be more like tales. Tales though, were spoken. Remembered bits of wisdom passed along from the ancestors and told at evening fire pits to help the younger gens never forget the fear their ancestors lived through. They were meant to keep the future gens from repeating the mistakes of the past.

Their repetition appeared to have not worked with Blake and Orid.

The separating pages had fallen into her lap.

Dover glanced over to see what she had found. Together, they read a few pages, fumbling over some words that didn't make sense. The page was about a young couple building a home together.

Together? That didn't make sense. How could a person ever move from one villa to another, and fully acclimate? Adult males lived alone. Mothers raised the children, except in rare cases that a sponsor took a child to be raised in another villa, like Dover had taken Robin.

The mother chose which villa she wanted her children to learn from, and belong to. She wouldn't know enough about the sponsor's villa to be able to teach them. The children would have a place in society carved out for them from birth, or infancy.

Zella wanted to settle down and stay in one place. Maybe she was becoming old, like the gen four grandmothers, and the gardeners.

She turned the page.

They both read quicker. Before they realized it, they had reached a break in the tale. The tale talked about two people being together, as if they planned to live together, instead of visit for a night or two. The home they talked about sounded permanent.

In some ways, that sounded wonderful to Zella. Always having someone there to rely on. She had thought her daughter would always be there for her, except during summer travel season.

Sure, there ways were similar, and secrets were forbidden. However, lots of knowledge never passed from one villa to another. There was simply no reason to describe to every Lava member the

musical talents of the Almond villa. Most had no interest, and others couldn't learn it as well as the musical Almond members. Of course, the Shims villa had some secrets. Though they willingly shared their medical knowledge with everyone, there had to be things they knew that no one else did. Even Tuttle and Webbel had specialties of their own braiding ropes, and weaving shawls and tunics.

To settle down, and not move constantly, would be nice. To have someone other than one's children, or nieces and nephews, to rely on would make middle adulthood easier, as long as they got along. Differences in their lifestyles kept the five villas from living together peacefully. Maybe it could work, at least at her age.

"I found something!" Calen waved his arms.

Zella covered a smile. He hadn't worked for many seasons. He always checked to see what others had found in Klapit, or reported to Blake.

She walked over to see what he had. It wasn't more paper, or dry rotted wood. Their pits were shallow. Plastic might be in these layers. She could see through it, and most plastic couldn't be seen through.

The item glinted in the sunlight. She touched the edge carefully and smiled. Not plastic, it was glass. A rare find. Most of the pieces were so tiny, and they broke easily, they were rarely used. Dover kept some for medical purposes too. They made excellent cutting tools. She handed it to Dover, as he would have a safe place to keep it.

"Do you think this is another pit, or only random bits Calen?"

"I think this may be the place our villa comes from. Water washed our villa away, and then disappeared a few gens ago, that is why we left. Our lore says we couldn't go north because of the water rise, though we were closer to the northern villas."

"I didn't know there were many northern villas."

"Some. Mills knows a few. I don't know how many," Calen said. "I'm sure there are far more than we know about. If each villa was connected to the one north, south, east, and west, think how many connections there might be."

"I'm not sure that would be a good thing," Zella said.

"Why not?" Calen said. "Don't you want to know everything there is to know? Don't you want to be able to know what happened to the ancestors, and why?"

Zella turned to Dover and then back to Calen. "I think we are seeing what happened to the ancestors, and why. Much as Goddess Amber said, secrets are dangerous, and Webbel kept secrets that mattered. Why did it happen, and how?"

Calen looked down at his hands, carefully examining the lines on them. "They. No, Blake wanted to rule alone and over everyone, like the rulers of old. He wanted everything his way, rather than going along with the needs and wishes of others. I think it goes back to his mother."

Blake's mother had been leader of the Webbels as Zella's gen grew up. She couldn't remember anything bad about her. "His mother was a kind, fair person. She was a good leader."

"No," Calen said. "She looked like a good leader to all the outsiders, and even to most of the Webbels. She kept a secret she shouldn't have."

Calen looked up into her eyes. "Blake was a rattler. She thought she wanted him, until he grew to look like the roamer who attacked her."

"Why did she keep the secret?"

"When Blake looked like the roamer, she already had another child. So she focused on the daughter, then on the others who came after. She thought Blake would never know. He knew. Even his walking by startled her. When he was ten, she was afraid of him. And he knew it."

"She turned the leadership over to him long ago," Dover said.

"No, not really." Calen played in the dirt, letting it slide through his hands. "He told her he was taking control. He told her if she didn't let him be in control, he would tell everyone her secret. I'm not sure if she was more afraid of him, or the rest of the Webbels."

Zella found his tale hard to believe. A mother wouldn't dream of being treated that way by her child. A woman simply wouldn't allow a child, and a son at that, to make decisions for her. She'd be expected to banish him from the community of villas first.

However, Zella had never been afraid of her own child. She had been afraid for both of them, not of them. What would she have done if her son who didn't survive, had said that to her?

"How can you know these things?" Zella asked.

With a sheepish grin on his face. "Well, I liked his sister, when she was about Tanna's age, and she had agreed to meet with me. I overheard the conversation outside their summer lodge. His sister and I ran and hid. I don't think he knows that I know about that."

"His mom died soon after, I think," Dover said. "No one knew what was wrong. Her other children went to live with their sponsors?"

"Yes," Calen said. "It was a shock. They didn't know the Tuttle villa lifestyle. They understood tools, and quickly developed an interest in weaving and fiber plants to stay away from their brother. They weren't happy."

"Did any return to Webbel?" Zella asked.

"I think they wondered off to Mills, one of the villas that traded with the Webbels. They tried to move as far away as possible, hoping he would forget them. His mom made him feel unwelcome as a child, so he made his sisters feel unwanted as adults," Calen said.

"If that's the way the ancestors lived and thrived, no wonder they died the way they did. That battlefield we passed overflows with scars," Zella said.

"There is another battlefield we pass," Dover said. "We always try to avoid it. The horses run through the place so many of their ancestors died in. They don't hide from it."

"Perhaps we need to remember it the way they do. Though, I'd rather forget it," Zella said.

"Wouldn't we all," Dover said. "Let's eat something and decide where we are going. We have to leave soon. Calen, are you up to walking?"

"Does it matter? We have to rescue those trapped women. We have to find Varl and Vira if they are alive."

"And Tanna and Robin as well," Zella said.

Calen reached for his huntboard. "Let's start now. I'm nervous about being here, in this field. It's too open."

They might not walk far today. The open field so full of life, was empty of the child she had raised to adulthood. Every step back would be a step closer to Tanna, and her community. Somehow, she had to save them, if she could. She would silently sing the songs of the ancestors all the way, and try to remember the Goddess Amber's words of wisdom. She would remember the words.

## Chapter 23

Tanna walked away from the scene of the gruesome stampede. She didn't look back. Everyone would follow her. To glance back would show she questioned if they would. It would be fun to watch the gen four grandmother with the horse. It was amazing to think of the animal so close to people, even though she knew they once were.

She reached the villa.

A circle of people from the four represented villas formed around the main fire pit.

The cleansing ceremony would unintentionally be changed. Zella hadn't had her practice it often. Maybe it changed every generation.

Everyone looked at her.

While it made her nervous, she knew her role. "We have allowed the Goddess Amber to decide the fate of those who harmed us. Our work is not done. The rest of Webbel must come back and declare their secrets, or be asked to move outside of our community. We must find the rest of the council. Most of you cannot travel."

No one spoke during the long pause. "Would the six hunters be willing to stay behind and protect the people here?"

Gel, Haro, and Kleal from Lava, and Wale, Ida, and Brix from Shims each grabbed their own spear, and set it in front of them.

They'd stay.

"Robin and I must leave. We must return to Klapit and determine what the Webbels are doing. We will leave today. Uden will stay behind. She is not well enough for the trip. We will need supplies."

"No! Don't leave me!" Rusty screamed as she ran into the circle.

The horses next to the grandmother shifted and snorted.

The girl raced up, and wrapped her arms around Tanna.

Patting her head and wiping away her tears, Tanna bent down. "Rusty, you won't be able to keep up. We aren't going to rest much. We hope to make it in two marches instead of four. Stay, and take care of your brother."

"Leave brother with Uden. Those horses, they have to have escaped from Webbel. Maybe from some of those roamers who attacked us," Rusty sobbed.

Tanna looked down at Rusty. "Tell that to everyone here, please."

Rusty turned around, wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath. "These two horses must have escaped from Webbel. Please, let me go too."

Robin stepped up beside her. "The danger is too great. You have responsibilities here. Both your brother, and your garden. Do you want to ignore your responsibilities at so young an age?"

Tanna fought to hide a smile. That ought to help. No one of any age, wanted to be accused of ignoring responsibilities.

"It's mine to save everyone. I have to. My mom, and my sponsor, were both part of the problem."

"Rusty, child, you did nothing wrong. Your mother and sponsor did no wrong. We do not know their ways, and they did not know ours. They did not attack our villas. People within our own community of villas allowed roamers to attack us. While we thank you for wanting to fix the problem, it's not your problem to fix. You are needed here. We might lose you. And they might hurt you worse." Rusty would make a good leader one day. She pleaded her case as any strong apprentice leader would.

"Please." Rusty looked up at her with tears in her eyes. "I can sneak into places they won't care about. I'm little. They don't expect me to know anything."

Tanna shuddered as she thought of what this girl, one-third her age, must have been through to think such things.

"Rusty, if your brother isn't enough, will you stay for one more reason?"

"What reason?" Rusty mumbled. She wiped her eyes and tried not to snifle.

"We need you here in case any of the Webbels come back here before we return." And in case we don't. "We need you here to help these people from all four villas know what to expect, and how to protect themselves. You know far more about what the Webbels know than anyone else. Can you do that for me? For your brother?"

Rusty wavered.



"How about for your mom and sponsor? Wouldn't they rather you had people around who would protect you?"

Rusty gulped. "Okay. I can teach you how to ride the horses and use them to help you."

Tanna smiled. "That would be an excellent idea. And whatever else you can tell us, will help too. Uden will be here for you."

Rusty ran back to Kol to hide her tears.

Tanna turned back to the group. "You have heard Rusty. Though she is an unknown child, she must be given status. Treat her as you wish to be treated. Learn what you need to of Webbel knowledge. Hopefully there will be no more trouble." Tanna turned her eyes to the gen four grandmother. "Grandmother, I hope you do not mind me taking your horse to try to save our community."

The grandmother smiled. "You must. I want to visit with her while you eat, please. I would thank you." Her smile brightened as she patted the horse beside her. It seemed to calm remarkably.

Would this horse, Sandy, be willing to go back to the Webbels?

The tiny villa buzzed with people. It was too small for a trade meeting, or summer gathering. Almond was adapting to members from the other villas. The other villas were adjusting to this new place, and not knowing where food and tools were stored. Drea showed someone from the Tuttle villa where to find food to gather for Tanna and Robin.

Part of the Shims villa had collected medicinal plants, and built temporary racks for drying, too close to Almond's accustomed walkways. They weren't used to having to work beside lodges instead of under them. Next to the medicinal racks were a few quickly thrown together Tuttle looms, almost never seen side by side. A few Lava members tried to teach the young children tales. They too were underfoot. Almond drums and flutes were scattered about on the ground, and others on logs. People tripped over each other in unexpected places, raising the tension levels.

The scene reminded Tanna of a tale she had heard about the ancient ancestors. Once, all knowledge was shared, much like this. Now, each villa specialized. A child would move to the villa of the person they most favored, so they would grow up with the tools they were best suited for.

One of the Almond villa nodded at the mess. "Tanna, who will be in charge while you are gone? What if you don't return? What if no one does?"

Tanna was sore from learning to ride a horse. While the horses accepted her and Robin, they were nervous and shied away when too many people crowded close, often causing them to lose their balance. After several tries, they managed to stay upright, even when a group from Shims had walked by waving leaves and branches at them.

"Normally, the Almond villa as a whole would be in charge, as this is their villa," Tanna said.

"Yes, though it's not the same now. What do you want us to do?"

Another decision Tanna didn't want. She could tell them to make the decision themselves.

As a leader's daughter and niece, she knew the individuals from other villas far better than the Almond group did. Most villas only knew a few people from the other villas. "When we gather round the fires for our midday meal, we will all decide together," Tanna said.

Would it be best for the group of mismatched skills to work together, or as individuals? Word spread and everyone expected the announcement. She picked up her wooden platter, filled it full of food, and sat down next to Robin.

"Don't worry. They'll do what's needed." Robin smiled.

She glanced at him, and then back at her plate. "I wish. We have gen four grandparents, infants, toddlers, and new mothers all here. They all have skills. We aren't leaving a single person who has any leadership qualities behind, other than the hunters."

She gulped a large bite of food. This might be her last good meal for a while.

Robin's hand touched her arm. "One. Though young, you already told her to help the others. She has seen more of this style camp than anyone else, even us." He waved his arm to include the confused arrangement of musical instruments, drying racks, and weaving looms spilled across the area in front of the treasury.

"I heard Rusty today, trying to help people set up things so they wouldn't be in each other's way. She can help them figure out how to work together."

"Good," Tanna said.

"All of our tool makers are Webbels." She whispered to Robin, not wanting anyone to hear the fear and concern in her voice.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have one villa that specialized so much. If they had no more tools, the Almond villa wouldn't have flutes or drums. The Shims wouldn't have medical tools. The gardeners and collectors, like Zella, wouldn't have digging tools. And Tuttle wouldn't have the tools they needed to cut and prepare ropes, looms, and nets to catch fish. They needed other tools, to hunt, and protect themselves.

"I think we are beginning to see a change. Some here can create tools, and teach others. Ask the gen four grandsponsor. A few others know basics. If the young children learn now to know many skills, it'll help. Who better to make a tool than the one who uses it, at least if they can." He glanced at the noisy group.

A toddler chased a dog carrying her new drumstick across his gatherboard.

Not all people who could use a tool had the skill or dexterity to make it. Learning how a tool was made would give a new sense of appreciation for the tool as it was used.

She finished eating.

The group waited to hear every word she said.

"First, as always, work for the benefit of the community. Each must use their individual strengths. We do not know if the rest of our villas will be able to come back."

Gasps echoed.

"Please." She raised her hand. "I am not trying to scare you. We have no idea if, or when, the Webbels roamers will be back. Or what they will bring with them. We must be prepared. Everyone should attempt to learn to make basic tools. The grandsponsors can show you the basics. Tools of all kinds. You may need them."

Their fear echoed as they rustled and whispered.

"I want everyone here to learn the basics of medicinal plant collection. Ask the young mothers from Shims to help you recognize the basic first aid plants. When, and where to collect and store them." The three young women smiled. She could tell they were pleased with their anticipated contribution.

"Next, I expect everyone here to learn the basics of rope winding and clothes production. We have several from Tuttle who

can teach. Maybe new designs will come from the combined work of grandmothers and young children."

The grandmothers held up a few babies, and smiled at the group.

"Almond is providing us with a wonderful garden. All the gardeners will assist Drea here. We must all respect their ways while we stay here, and ever afterwards. Listen to their tales and music every night. Practice repeating their tales as well. Our tales must be preserved."

"We have the six hunters."

They sat partially off to the side. They obviously felt out of place in this gathering of women, children, and elderly.

"They will teach the older children basic trapping and hunting skills, both for protection, and food gathering. They will share the responsibility for the protection of the Almond villa."

The hunters lifted their spears in a signal of friendship.

"Lastly," Tanna said. "Rusty will be our greatest help. She will teach you what she knows about the Webbels. She will help you decide what you need to do while we are gone. Work for the group as whole, while learning everything you can. Our community may depend upon it."

All eyes were on Tanna. It was the only thing she could think of. The only solution to involve everyone, keep the camp active, and not petrified with fear.

"Glenna, if you are finished eating, please begin with one of the elder tales. I want to hear you repeat it yourself. The gen four grandmothers will verify it is correct."

Glenna gulped as she sat down her platter. She sat up as straight as she could. Using her hands as well as her words, she began the tale of the fiery clouds of dust and ash that brought constant movement to the land.

As the tale continued, people's faces relaxed. Even though the tale told of the death and destruction of people, animals, and land, it was familiar. A good choice.

Soon after the meal, Tanna sat on the horse the grandmother had called Sandy. She seemed gentle enough. Tanna longed to run through the grasses. The back of a horse might not be as safe as her dream had been.

Tanna urged the horse forward.

At first, Sandy didn't want to go.

Gel reached over and slapped Sandy's back end.

Tanna held on.

Robin's horse tried to keep up.

At least they were pointed in the correct direction. This would be a long, scary trip. Wind whipped their faces as they sped across the grasslands. Everything appeared so different from up on a horse's back. For one thing, she could see over all the grass tops, not only the shorter, grazed areas. The scrub brush she knew existed a march or more away, was visible now. When walking, it wasn't visible until she almost reached it.

"We could go anywhere, and recognize landmarks quickly. Less risk of being lost," Robin said.

"As long as we can control the horses. This is fun. I hope they don't decide to leave us when we rest." Tanna turned the horse slightly.

"They didn't leave today when they had a chance. There are an awful lot of coyotes and hyenas over there." Robin pointed.

"We've already reached the stampede spot. We could reach Klapit sooner than we expect." Tanna shifted her weight.

The horses neighed and shied away from the carnage.

Carnivores fought over the bones and ignored the horses.

The horses stumbled past the bloodshed. Sandy snorted and reared as two coyotes raced in front of her dragging something, and snarling at each other.

Tanna fought to stay on the horse.

"Well, we can see far, as long as what we want to see is above the grass tops. In this high stuff, we can't see normal things. Not much help is it."

A lion, or anything else, could be hidden, waiting for them somewhere. Even the roamers could hide from them.

Kol and Logan had not followed them from the stampede area. That was an unsettling thought. The dogs could become lost out here, if the people on horseback went a route the dogs weren't used to going.

Time spent riding didn't pass the same as walking either.

The horses slowed at the entrance of the Klapit cow lodge.

"When did you find the horses?" Erin leaned against the wall.

"They are helpful," Tanna said.

"Some of the roamers think so too. They catch them. Apparently, away beyond the Mad Gods, there is a place where people keep horses and use them every day. I guess you will bring that to us now. That would be good," Erin said.

"Or not," Robin said. "We already see problems with it. We have to go on."

"Careful, or you won't be able to walk tomorrow." An odd laugh trickled out as Erin turned to her herd of sheep. "I'm surprised Uden and your young friend isn't with you. Where did you leave them?"

"In a safe place," Tanna said.

Kol and Logan better catch up soon.

Erin was at least partially right. They would be sore from riding. Her legs already ached from all the practice. Bruises covered her arms and legs. She tried to find a way she could sit more comfortably.

Something was wrong with Erin.

"Do you think we should take one of the cleared walkways?" Tanna asked.

"No," Robin said. "While they might be quicker, we would be seen by animals and people."

"I don't think we should talk much either." Her own thoughts led down trails of tales as she searched for answers. Fear escalated due to Erin's strange behavior.

Logan and Kol ran up, tongues hanging out.

Where they had been?

Horses always travelled in herds, unless perhaps when foaling. Two living horses alone in Klapit would be unexpected. However, to leave them behind could mean an uncertain future for the horses, and the people.

The horses shuffled and pulled nervously as they approached Klapit.

Zella and Dover needed to be found. Let the hard work rest on someone else's shoulders a while.

Something was wrong though.

Shuffling sounds and loud unknown voices weren't far away.

Grass moved, and the wind wasn't blowing.

## Chapter 24

Zella, Dover, and Calen hurried back to the creek to fill their water gourds.

Calen sat beside the stretcher he had rode on. He fingered the limbs and touched the grass they wove to hold his feet still. The ancestral object had fallen off, and rolled to the side.

Dover picked it up and placed it in his gatherboard.

"I'll be back." Zella pushed her way through the underbrush to where she had hidden the strange pages of tales. She hid the pages they had found the night before in the bottom of her gatherboard. It was too valuable to leave behind for animals, or roamers, to destroy. A pile of broken red rock on top of the boulder would leave a reminder of where she had found the pages, if she ever came back.

Returning to the creek, she sat beside Dover. "I'd rather find Tanna and Robin and be sure they are safe. Uden wouldn't be much help in protecting them."

"I think they are safe. They are too smart to walk into an ambush." Dover closed his gatherboard. "If we don't find Vira and Varl, who will be dig leader in their villas?"

"We need more than three of us, or even seven to protect Tanna, Robin, and Uden." Calen covered his head with one arm to block the sun.

"If we had all stayed in one place, it wouldn't have happened," Zella said.

"Tired of traveling?" Calen said. "I was once. That's how I got into this condition."

He sat up. "The ancestors wanted us to keep moving for a reason, maybe lots of reasons. Now, I wish I had listened to them, instead of Blake."

"You, and both of us, might not be alive if you had listened," Dover said.

"My death might have sparked something sooner. We will never know. I wish I could travel better." Calvin pushed against the stretcher.

"Maybe there are more people who are sick of Blake's ways. Maybe some can secretly join us," Dover said.

"Like those men in the dig lodge." The memory of the light glancing off faces as the stooped shouldered men were led back to hide in a pit in the floor stirred Zella to her feet.

"We have to hurry." She pulled her gatherboard tight, and gripped the limbs from the stretcher. No point in leaving them behind. Calen might need them again.

They stepped out of the brush and into the grasslands. Their trail was faint, as they intended. Dover, a head taller, stepped out to look for signs of lions, and then back for Zella to lead.

The only woman in the group, Zella was expected to lead, even if Dover was the better trail reader. She was both an offering to the Goddess, and in the best position to hear the high-pitched wild animal sounds that women tended to hear before men.

Dover walked beside Calen, and could call for her. He helped him through the rough spots when needed. The grass grew high, and Calen fought for breath as the heat increased.

They had to stop after only a half march. By their second half march, Calen had trailed behind.

"Hopefully we can find the hunters from the rest of the villas, before Blake decides to do anything." Calen panted in the heat.

"What would he do?" Dover asked.

She didn't want to guess. The changes she had seen were bad enough.

"Let's rest." Calen said.

Zella and Dover sat down.

Calen tiptoed to peek as far as he could over the top of the grass. He relaxed. "Okay, let's not talk much unless we whisper about our plans. Some roamers have excellent hearing, and are exceptional at hiding. Many of them are reported to be rattlers kicked out of distant villas."

Zella and Dover drew closer.

He turned his head around, and listened to the breeze blowing. "I know something. Blake found Westpit, or so he named it. He claimed to be sending Varl and Vira in search of it. He knows where it is."

"What?" Blake wasn't who everyone thought he was.



"He takes people, and makes them weak, then forces them to dig for him. I think he is looking for something. I don't know what. I haven't been there."

"Then you don't know." Dover said.

"The men in the dig lodge were part of the group that were forced to make a wall. Blake put people inside to work and they couldn't escape."

"They could step over a wall." Zella pulled pieces of grass and started weaving.

"Those long white, or grey, stretches of rock that we find, often in long lines across the prairie, can be broken. Then they are pulled up to stand in the ground, like jagged teeth in a jaw. Walls so high you can't reach over them standing on someone's shoulders."

Calen twisted his hands. "It's dry there, with little rain and few storms. Little grass grows, and few animals, so no one goes there. Who knows, maybe it was cursed by the ancestors. Maybe we shouldn't let anyone go there."

"Why are you telling us this now?" Dover asked.

"I fear. Zella, I fear tales you used to tell. The ancestors warned us of people who didn't care about others. What if he steals a few members of the villas, herds them there, and they can't escape? Blake may promise to let the ones he stole go free. He may block everyone inside."

Zella shivered in the warm sunshine. Blake is searching for something he feels is important, if he would so blatantly break the ancestor's laws. Secrets and violence among the villas had been unheard of for several gens now.

"Those men got out of the walls. He'd have to open them for more people to enter." Dover said.

"I'm not sure how," Calen said. "Maybe they worked outside. Maybe they are people who lower food and water in for the men and women he has in there. I don't know if I wish that he would find what he is searching for, so he would let them go. Or, that he doesn't find it. Because he might use it, whatever it is, to kill or maim more people."

"He can't have many people in there. Leaders would notice if villa members were missing." Zella said.

"Blake took people from Shells and Mills, Shells had no contact with any outsiders. You said he never told any of the other four villas about Shells and Mills. There are always roamers from who knows where appearing at Klapit. Other villas that we don't know must be growing too big also, and sending unwanted people out on their own, with nowhere to go."

"It's a long way back. We have to save some strength for when we return too." Dover shouldered his gatherboard and tapped Calen's shoulder.

Calen's face was pale. He nodded and drank some water.

Heat and sunshine beat down on them. Birds circled far in the distance. Being in front gave Zella the opportunity to sort through, and silently chant, the tales of Goddess Amber.

An occasional animal ran across the trail in front of them. Rabbits hopped out of the way, and peeked back between stems, nibbling the undergrowth. Rattlesnakes slithered away as they walked past.

They were almost to the stream where the juvenile lion cubs had jumped on her. Carefully, she scanned the area. The lioness might be long gone, unless this area was a common horse, or other large animal, migration route. Lions could be near, dozing either in the sun where the horses grazed, or in the shadows near the creek.

Zella held out her hand, palm up, motioning the men to wait. The grasshoppers chirped, and rodents of all kinds scurried through the grass on their personal paths. Nothing seemed out of place. No tension or fright in the air.

She stepped carefully, listening as every twig snapped, and scanned through the dense grass. Nothing unusual. Under the dense brush were freshly chewed bones. She picked one up. The bones were about right for the horse kill. Lions must be comfortable here. Many sets of paws had trodden much of the grass near the stream bank.

Dover and Calen followed her cautiously as they approached the place they had hid from the lion cubs. No sign of lions here. The normal sounds of brush life stirred up by the three of them continued, cautious creatures, not afraid.

Zella sat down by the stream. She had known Calen since he was a boy. They had grown up looking forward to summers

together to explore, dig, and find new things. They had dreamed of finding the ancestral tools that meant they would never go hungry. The ancestors had some way to store food regardless of weather conditions, and they wanted to find it together, and share it with their families and friends so no one would ever be hungry. Back then, even Blake had been friendly, and said he wanted to help the villas find what the ancestors left for them.

"We can rest here. It's a good march from here. Calen, do you remember this spot?"

"No, not from the last visit. I think I may have been here once long ago when I went out with hunters. Before I decided to be a dig leader." He sat down, and picked up a few pebbles in his hand.

"Wish I hadn't." He lifted his hand and let the pebbles fall out. "It's sad when no one wants an inherited position. I didn't want to hurt mom, so I agreed."

Calen picked up a stick and drew a circle in the sand. "Orid's mother said I was his sponsor. I had to raise him because she died. She was from Shims. I knew I needed to keep my status for him, whether I wanted it or not."

He added a smaller circle inside the original. "He hurts things; plants, animals, even people. Blake laughs. I'm not like that. I am calm, quiet, and could never hurt anyone." He dropped the twig and looked at Zella and Dover.

"He wasn't mine, was he?"

She couldn't answer him.

"Once, our ancestors would say it took more than being a biological donator to be a parent, whatever that means. Now, I think we can say it takes more than being born, to be the child of your mother." Most children treated their mother and sponsor well. It was expected. She couldn't imagine growing old without Tanna there to care for her, as she once cared for tiny Tanna, born earlier than most. If Dover hadn't been at her birth, Tanna wouldn't have survived, regardless of Zella's own healing skills.

"Orid made his choice. He is an adult now." Zella crushed the grass in her hand.

"His mother." Dover stared off into the distance.

By not finishing the sentence, Zella knew what he meant. Orid had been a rattler, and should have been left to die. Calen had

never been told that she took herbs to end her life after leaving Orid at his lodge. No point in telling him now.

"Orid is much worse than you know. Probably, much worse than I know. I think he has many friends among the roamers, if such people can be called friends. I wish I could have reached him. I tried."

Zella didn't want to know more right now. Her stomach clutched at the thoughts of what Orid might do if he found Tanna and Uden.

"Calen, at what point should we turn the direction you want us to go." Zella changed the conversation as she pulled out the remnants of their food supply.

Calen's face cleared a little as he focused on the issues at hand. He took a handful of dried vegetables. He added them to his bowl, and set it by the stream to soak in a little water, and for the sun to heat. Fire here was a risk, due to roamers and lions. "I have no idea. There are so many places. It depends on who Blake sent where after we left."

Zella sat in silence, waiting on Calen. His opinion from here on out mattered, whether she liked it or not.

"I think," Calen stammered. "I think we should go the route we came for a ways further, so we don't miss Klapit all together. When we reach a certain rise, we need to turn west, and come in from that angle."

Zella picked up her bowl to drink her cold soup.

A short march later, and they turned west.

At the sound of voices, they slid down to the ground and crept forward.

Flies buzzed in the blazing sun. It was not a normal sunny day. There shouldn't be this many flies with no animals around.

"They weren't any fun." One male said.

"No fight left in them." The second male's deep voice boomed across the grass.

Zella shivered.

A third voice laughed. "Don't worry. Something will happen soon. Blake is waiting on Orid to come back."

"Yeah, Orid and his other scouts too."

"Orid will be slowed down by the people he brings. Even prodding them, they can't move fast. It may be a day or two. We are going to have to make these women last."

A fly buzzed in front of her eyes. The men were almost close enough to touch. She couldn't brush the fly off.

"Toss them some stale water and some old veggies, they'll last." The man laughed.

Deep voice said, "Wonder how many of the scout's group he will send to Westpit?"

"Too many, that's for sure."

The sounds of their voices faded into the distance.

Zella tried hard not to throw up. This sounded awful. Somehow, she had to save them. She didn't know where to begin. With only Calen and Dover. Calen might be their only hope.

She motioned the men to her. "Calen, how far?"

"Not far, that way." Calen pointed. "Sounds like they left the pits. We better go now."

"The pits have been around how long, Calen?"

Calen sighed. "For food."

"For people?"

"Food for the people yes." He looked at her, then away as he closed his eyes.

"Used to hold people, since last winter, I think."

"Take us there now."

He nodded. "You won't like it. I don't."

## Chapter 25

Grass swayed gently in a rising breeze as the indistinguishable voices drifted closer along the path to their right. An unnaturally high laugh pierced the distance.

Tanna and Robin slid off the horses, and hid in the grass beside them. Her body ached from remaining motionless so long.

The murmur of voices drifted away.

Rays of sunlight played through the grass as the sun lowered to the horizon. Wild horses pawed and snorted nearby. Sandy and her companion kept their heads high, alert, and ears perked. They did not lower their heads to nibble the grass.

Tanna had no idea what to do next. They had to move nearer the camp to find her mom and Dover.

Darkness crept in.

The rest of the villas should have returned to camp. Gel had told them of the early hunt trip that Blake had sent everyone on, even the women and children who normally stayed behind. The dig leaders should have been there, and the summer garden that Webbel had added several trade meets before. No singing, or voices, could be heard. No fires popped in the evening breeze.

Tanna reached for Sandy's rope. The closeness of the horse left her reassured somehow, even with those dangerous hooves, still blood stained from the events of the early morning. She peeked under the horse's neck. With Goddess Amber's help, people would see the horse, and not her.

It was almost dark. A few stars twinkled in the sky.

They approached the clearing.

The place appeared deserted. No people, or camp, in sight.

Off in the distance, an eerie light glowed. To the west of Klapit, where Blake did not allow them to go.

Robin saw it too.

Rather than go through the clearing, Tanna turned back and went through the tall grass, keeping the clearing to her right. She led Sandy.

Robin followed behind with his horse.

Logan and Kol were nowhere in sight.

Tanna glanced from the ground in front of her, to the light she was following. The light moved west as well. A moving light was unusual. Something she had never seen. When people carried torches, they flicked far more than this light did. Torches had to be carried above the grass level. These lights were closer to the ground, almost knee height. The light moved at the same speed she did.

Perhaps her perception was off, and the light was further away than it appeared.

Figures of people walked on the edges of the low-level lights. The light moved along at less than half their height.

She followed them from well inside the Grass Sea.

The light paused, not far from where she was. Another slow-moving group joined the people with the light. They were close enough to hear loud voices now.

"Brought some of the women," one voice said. "It wouldn't be as much fun without them."

Harsh laughter sounded through the grasses.

"Glad you made it, almost to the clearing. Tomorrow, we march to Westpit," Blake said. "There was no need to bring those women. They look too weak to walk tomorrow. You don't need them anyway. Send them back to their homes."

Laughter resounded as the men walked on. "No way. We can't turn them loose. They might find your friends. We'll keep them as long we can."

Tears formed in Tanna's eyes. No women's voices had echoed or sung in the night air. The strange men said there were some with them. She watched closely as the group moved off. Towards the end of the line, some people moved, and tripped, as if their hands were tied.

"Move along!" One male voice yelled.

Tanna recognized none of the male voices. A good thing, perhaps. If roamers were keeping women silent, it was better than if someone in their own villas were hurting women. She'd have to rescue Zella, Vira, or Nala if she could find them.

She kept her distance, and stayed quiet. A rescue would require more light, and knowing who she was rescuing. Her mind raced,

trying to figure out who the men and women were, and how she could rescue them with only herself and Robin.

The group gathered around a large fire at the edge of a much smaller clearing.

Leading Sandy, she crept as close as she dared.

The women, if the skeletons with long faces dressed in rags, their hands tied in front, could be called women anymore, huddled near the flames for warmth. None were recognizable.

Tanna's blood boiled. She wanted to rush out there and do something. Anything. They would end up captive too, if she and Robin tried to do anything alone. Maybe if they quietly listened, she would hear something useful, or find a way to sneak in and release them. Crouched in the grass, she held the lead rope of her mare loosely. Hopefully, the men would not see two horse heads over the grass tops in the dark.

Robin tapped her shoulder and pointed to the horses and back the way they had come. He crept off with his horse.

Not her choice. It might be safest for them, and the horses. She followed him back to a dead scrub tree that had long fallen. They tied the ropes long enough that the horses could graze.

Her stomach churned. They crept back to the clearing.

Hopefully, the men would drink something that would help them sleep, and forget to post a watch. She would have to be ready. Dried meat and her water gourd would give her energy for a rescue. Tanna tried to match each voice with an outfit. Not an easy match, when most of the men's clothes were in little better condition than the frightened women's rags.

An ancestor's tale of battles came to life in front of her. Her eyes wanted to close and block out the living nightmare.

Robin took out some dried meat as well. He sat beside her and held her hand.

There would be enough water for tonight. They would worry about more, tomorrow.

The women clustered close to the fire, faces ashen, holding their tied hands across their chests. One though, could barely sit up. She kept falling over. The other women appeared to ignore her. There were subtle movements of heads as they glanced at the falling woman.



The men roasted fresh meat on the fire pit. Talking and laughing they shared around a water gourd. Apparently, the drink was intoxicating. As the men became louder, they occasionally staggered up to a woman and clawed at her, and then backed away.

"This is the last of the bison meat." One roamer held a stick with a bit of meat dangling.

A chorus of joy echoed through the roamer's cheers.

The women stared down at the ground.

"You held none back?" Blake asked.

"You said not to." Another overzealous man slapped Blake on the shoulder.

Blake turned to the man. "I suppose so. With none left, Almond and Tuttle will easily find another pit to dig in. We'll keep these women close for making clothes and cooking. Though, you need to feed these women so they can make you new clothes. Why do you treat them so bad? Only a few deserved it, and they are already dead."

The men laughed loudly at Blake.

"As for Shims and that trouble making Lava villa, they can stay inside Westpit, and dig forever! We have so much to find to understand the ancestors. They don't have as much interest in digging as I thought they would. Zella seems to have lost her desire to dig and share knowledge."

One man by the fire hadn't touched the water gourd. "If they have many children, it will become too crowded soon."

Blake laughed. "We will need replacement diggers. Most of them won't live too long once I send in a few of my scouts to make them work faster. We can pull most of their men out and make them build pathways and such. Let the women do the work in the pit. Then no children will be born." His laugh was loud and harsh to Tanna's ears.

Blake planned to destroy their villas. Her hands trembled. She hoped the women would not suffer tonight for her indecision.

Robin didn't have any ideas either.

Tanna jumped and a shiver went up her spine as something touched her legs.

Kol and Logan panted, as if from a long run.

Tanna smiled as she reached to them. They needed to rest. There might be plenty of running later tonight. Though she had no idea where they could run to.

Logan turned his head, and looked off into the dark, beyond the horses. He let out a low whine, so low only Tanna could hear it.

"Be back," she whispered to Robin.

She grabbed her spear and crawled off behind Logan. He led her back the way they had a come.

Beyond kicking range of Robin's horse, Jorn sprawled in the grass.

# Chapter 26

Zella shook her head. Calen's tales of women forced to live in pits were disgusting. She wished Calen had come and begged them for help. Maybe he hadn't known who to trust either.

Even though voices could sound different when a person's personality changed, Zella didn't think those men were originally Webbels.

Calen led single file along the path the scouts had sauntered down. His steps slowed. He held up his hand, and motioned for silence.

They reached a clearing. Calen scanned the area carefully. Taking a deep breath, he pulled a ladder out of the grass beside the trail, before he walked to the center of the clearing.

He scanned the edge of the clearing again. "Grab over there," he whispered as he reached for a tuft of grass.

A rawhide cover peeked out from under the beaten down grass. She grabbed hold and pulled with Calen. They uncovered a wooden entry on the ground in the middle of the clearing.

Calen lifted the entry, and peeked in. He motioned Zella forward. "It's okay, come into the light."

Zella stepped up to the entry and glanced in.

Several women in little more than rags, if that, shivered in the underground cold. A few had infants clinging to them, and naked children held on to the legs of others.

Zella glared at Calen. "We have to help them out," she whispered.

"Out of the pit, into death for us all, if we don't do it right. Those roamers may be back with water and food for them soon."

"Now." Dover lowered the ladder into the pit. "They'll throw food and water in. Let the mice have it."

The ladder hit bottom.

"Come ladies, hurry." Dover sat down and reached his hand into the pit.

Calen glanced around as the women scrambled up the ladder, some in obvious pain and discomfort. Most of the women and children looked as if they hadn't seen a decent meal in a season, or more.

The last one she could see stepped on the ladder. Zella steadied it. "Is that everyone?"

"A few dead people, they'll take them out later, maybe." A tear trickled down the cheek of a young woman, not yet gen two.

"Hurry," Dover said.

The girl ran after the other women and children.

Zella didn't recognize her, or any of these women. Maybe they hadn't eaten in so long they weren't recognizable.

She helped Dover pull the hide of grass back across the entry in the ground and carried the ladder back to its hiding place. Dover took the lead, and Zella followed behind.

Where they could go with these women in this condition, she had no idea. They were in no condition to be going anywhere. Most were barely walking skeletons. So pale, their skin would burn to a crisp in a march, if they could walk that far. As for food, there wasn't enough in Zella and Dover's gatherboards for more than one or two.

Dover led them through the clearing and into the tall Grass Sea, higher than their heads.

The women and children were so thin, the path completely closed up behind them.

Noises sounded behind them. The roamers might be back to toss food to the women. Well, they could use that food. Zella signaled to one woman who appeared healthier than the rest, and motioned the others on.

She strode back to a spot near where the group had come through. The other woman followed behind her. "Fran," she whispered.

Zella watched the clearing.

"I will." One of the men reached to pull the hide away from the pit.

"Let's throw it in. They eat off the ground." The other man held a small basket. "Besides, the sooner we return, the sooner we can eat. The bison won't last much longer."

Zella wondered where the food was for the women. The basket could hold enough food for one, maybe two people, not the dozen or so previously in the pit.

"Maybe we should eat their food, and then visit them." The first man leered at the second.

"Yuck. I don't want yesterday's leftovers. I saw the cook put moldy meat in there anyway."

"Hush, they might hear you." The stronger man pulled the hide away from the entry.

The other man stared into the Grass Sea.

"Bub, I see footprints." He looked up, almost directly at Zella. "I think we better go away from here."

The stronger man laughed. "You and your superstitions. You need to quit having those dreams. Besides, some of us came out here and danced around the women's pits last night. They cried while we sang and danced, and even cooked cow meat. Of course, we didn't share any with them. Come on now, pull."

The woman next to Zella trembled. Fran better not cry now.

Zella couldn't hear the other women, children, or Dover and Calen. Tracking them once this was over would be a challenge. "We have to kill them if they see us." She whispered and grabbed her spear.

Fran gritted her teeth and picked up a stone larger than her fist.

The stronger man reached for the wooden entry set in the ground.

The smaller man stood back, and scanned the perimeter of the clearing.

Zella jumped as something brushed her leg.

Naom stretched out against her, watching the men.

Naom could find Dover.

"Come and accept your offering." The stronger man held the entry up. He waited, and then turned to the other man. "I don't see anyone. Do you think they suffocated?" He laughed loudly.

Zella glanced at Fran, and motioned to Naom.

The smaller man took off running the way they had come.

Zella let him go. Naom would catch him. She ran forward and threw her spear into the back of the man who laughed and watched the smaller man run.

As he gurgled, Fran threw her rock into his head, then grabbed it, and beat what was left of his head to a mushy pulp.

Zella shuddered, and pulled her aside.

A yell echoed, and she turned her attention to the other man.

Naom had him on the ground, teeth at his throat.

Zella didn't want to kill him. He might be valuable. "Naom, hold him."

"Quickly," she said to Fran.

Fran trembled.

They dragged the dead man's body, and shoved it into the hole in the ground.

While he didn't deserve a burial, they had to hide the body. When other roamers arrived and stepped on his putrefying body, they deserved the results. Hopefully, the Goddess would understand and not be angered that they had buried him. They slammed the wooden entry shut and pulled the hide over top.

She ran to the other man. Fran was close behind. "Leave be," she whispered, red faced and out of breath from exertion and hunger.

"Find food in my gatherboard." Zella pointed.

She turned to the man. "Why?"

"Don't kill me. I didn't want to. I don't like it. She can tell you."

"Why?" Zella signaled Naom to sit, guard, and stop growling.

"They said they would kill me if I didn't go along. I caught them when they captured my wife. Only they didn't know she was my wife. I try to sneak extra food to them all, including her."

Zella glanced at the woman beside her.

It was as much Dover's right to make the decision as hers. She reached into her gatherboard and pulled out a piece of rope. She motioned Naom backwards, and scanned the clearing. "Sit up. Your hands will be tied. If you try to escape, you will die."

He sat up, rubbed his arms, and put them behind his back so she could tie them. His arms were scratched from his fall. She tied them tight enough he couldn't pull them free, and loose enough he could walk easily. His head hung low as he waited.

"Your name?" What she had to do next was a greater disrespect to the man.

"Monrol," he whispered.

Fran nodded.

She pulled out a piece of cowhide and tied it carefully across his face. He could breathe, and maybe scream. It would be difficult for him to talk.

Zella motioned Fran to help her pick Monrol up.

Fran helped her steady the man.

"Now walk. Naom will lead us." She picked up her gatherboard and motioned Naom to find Dover.

The basket of rotting meat was left tilted over and spilled on the ground.

At the edge of clearing, she glanced back. No clear signs of a scuffle were visible. This man was small enough, other men might think it was simply a woman who had tried to escape and been tackled. Hopefully, they wouldn't be followed.

Naom led the way.

Zella and Fran helped Monrol along. They moved slow. Those other women and children couldn't move fast either. It might not take long to catch up.

She nearly tripped over Naom lying flat in the grass.

Off to the right, most of the women sat, out of breath from their quick walk. At this rate, they would never make it anywhere safe. If there was such a place.

Dover and Calen were ahead, off to the left on the ground.

They must have reached another clearing.

Zella glanced at Fran, and motioned her to sit down. Then, she signaled Naom to watch them while she hurried forward to Calen and Dover.

## Chapter 27

Tanna's hopes fell. She had hoped Logan and Kol had found Zella and Dover. Jorn, she wasn't sure of. As her mother's brother, she should be sure he was on the same side and would protect her. Something the gen four grandmother had said nagged at her memory.

Jorn held his finger up to his lips and listened. "How many?" He whispered.

How many had been at the fire? "Maybe twenty or so scouts. And ten or so women, tied up."

He winced. "Okay. We have to rescue them, and find out where they are going. I heard the last of Blake's speech."

"Where are Zella and Dover?"

"Don't worry. We'll find them."

Relief flooded through her.

"Wait here. I'll be back." Jorn crawled off and out of sight.

Tanna waited and listened. Loud laughter at the fire pit startled her. She crawled back to Robin and whispered the exchange to him.

He said nothing.

She crept back into her spot to watch the group around the fire. It made her nauseous to watch and think what those poor women must have gone through.

As dangerous as Orid was, these roamers were far worse. Where had they come from? Why had Blake allowed them to do these things? He should have requested a council meeting when roamers appeared, not allowed them to do his dirty work. Rusty had said the bad men were part of Webbel, not Shells. These men weren't Webbels that she knew of.

Hopefully, Jorn could be trusted.

The early night stretched onward. Men cut up the roasted meat and ate almost all of it. They staggered to the tied women, and shoved the rawest pieces of meat into their mouths. They laughed and poured water down the women's throats as well.

Tanna knew what was about to happen and was afraid she would throw up.

A touch on her shoulder made her jump.



Jorn whispered. "Wait until they spread out. We have plenty of people ready. Sorry you have to see this."

She blinked and turned back to the fire pit.

Two roamers had grabbed each bound woman and dragged her off. Only Blake and the cook were not joining the roamers. Two men dragged a woman directly toward where she hid with Jorn, and Robin.

Jorn smiled.

Tanna shivered and gripped her spear.

Other roamers disappeared into the Grass Sea with barely struggling women.

Blake and the other man did not move. They leaned back against a huntboard.

Jorn held his hand up to Tanna and Robin to wait.

Two men dropped a tied woman, almost in Tanna's face.

One roamer came to the woman's head to hold her down.

Tanna's spear glinted in the moonlight.

A quick thrust, and that spear was through the roamer's body.

The other one tried to run.

Robin and Jorn's spear pierced his back.

The roamer's head crashed into the clearing. He fell face down.

Two spears quivered in his back.

Other roamers screamed and fell through the clearing's edge with spears in their backs.

Tanna turned to the woman.

The woman pulled away, and glanced at Robin and Jorn.

"Safe." Tanna turned back to the clearing. Goddess Amber would understand these murders tonight. For the good of the community.

Blake and the other man stared at the spears in the backs of the dead roamers. They were used to screams as women fought the roamers attacking them. They weren't used to roamers falling back into the clearing with spears sticking out of their backs.

The two now stood back to back, their spears ready. They circled trying to figure out where the danger was. Catching Blake, without being hurt or killed, while he had a spear in hand, would be difficult.

Tanna almost smiled. Killing a person wouldn't be easy. Blake at least, was responsible for the deaths of many. Perhaps even Zella and Dover, as they were nowhere to be found. She fully intended to find out.

She parted the grasses and advanced with her spear in hand.

Blake saw her in the firelight and laughed. "A girl. Orid should have kept you here last fall."

She stepped closer, spear lifted high.

The laugh died.

Tanna didn't look back.

Logan and Kol growled, only a body length in front of her.

Blake had nowhere to go. He smiled. "Hello Robin. Glad to see you decided to join the fun. Surprised Tanna tolerates you after what you did to that little girl."

Her mind simmered at the memory of the ruse. Blake did not know the truth about Rusty.

"She and Zella both think they run the community." He laughed long and loud.

Robin let out a short laugh. "Yeah, I suppose so." He ignored her and walked in front of the dogs. He carried his spear lightly, at waist level.

She knew how fast he could set it.

"Why don't we sit and talk? You seemed to want to talk to your friend there." Robin held his hand out.

Blake looked at him, uncertainty clear as he hesitated. "Okay."

He sat down with his friend behind his back.

"Tanna, bring my gatherboard. I have some horse meat Blake might like."

She stared at him. Tanna knew better than to turn her back on Blake. Carefully, she stepped backwards out of the clearing.

Robin had a plan.

Now, if the horses were waiting, she knew what to do.

## Chapter 28

Zella slid to the ground beside Dover and Calen. "Monrol," she whispered.

"Trouble?" Dover said.

"Killed the other one." That one deserved to die. In fact, mice and rats were probably already feasting on his body, as well as the spoiled meat basket.

"I wasn't the only one who wanted to save them," Calen said. "Another pit here, we have to hurry. I know of at least one more pit, and if those roamers don't show back up, they will eventually be missed."

"We have to do something with all these sickly people." Zella said.

"Leave them here," Calen said. "If the roamers are having a celebration tonight we need to move fast. Then, gather them all together here, to hurry on to Shells. Their community isn't happy with Blake's ideas."

"I'm surprised they keep them so close," Dover said.

"They wouldn't if they could. The bad roamers fed them, almost enough to keep them alive, for their entertainment. Too far away, and it's too much trouble."

"I can't understand why Blake let this happen. Communities need as many women as possible. Let's hurry," Zella said.

The three stepped into the clearing, and hurried to the center.

Calen found the hide cover.

A pile of sticks tied together covered the entry. Dover pulled it aside. Sunlight streamed in. Shadowy forms cowered below, as if afraid of the sunlight. A rancid odor wafted out of the pit in the ground.

"Come," Zella said. "We need to quietly leave this grave." First one woman, then another, moved closer on hearing her voice.

Dover and Calen lifted the ladder down.

As each woman exited, Zella hugged her, and pointed her in the direction of the others huddled in the grass.

The last young woman stepped up the ladder.

"Any more?"

She shook her head and hurried in the direction Zella pointed.

Calen and Dover hid the ladder back where it had been, keeping in the tracks of others.

Zella closed the trap entry.

It took two people to pull the hide across the ground.

"You don't think anyone is left down there?"

Calen shook his head. "No. Not alive at least. The men never took the dead out."

They hurried back to the Grass Sea.

Dover walked to where all the women and children were gathered, quite as could be. Most looked as if they could barely move, and couldn't walk to a safe place.

"Calen, you are sure the next place is only a short walk away?"

Dover drank from his water gourd.

"For the three of us, yes. With them, it would take too long."

"Can we send them on towards where they need to go?"

"They'll need someone to lead them." Calen wiped sweat off his forehead.

Dover scanned the crowd. Most of these women were not from Webbel. His eyes rested on Monrol.

"Monrol, will you lead them to wherever Calen tells you too?"

Monrol couldn't speak with the cloth over his mouth, so he nodded.

"Calen, tell him where to go. Tell the women and children to walk, and then we will catch up with them. We will take Naom with us."

Zella made sure all the women had at least a sip of water. It was something at least. She didn't know how far they had to go.

The sun dipped toward the horizon of grass.

The women lined up quickly to walk single file. Monrol had Fran and another woman to steady him. While slow moving, the procession was safer than being in the ground, buried alive. The group toddled off.

Zella hoped the women could fend for themselves, and make it to where Calen sent them. These women's safety would determine the safety of their own villas

She and Naom followed Dover and Calen.

Unusual sounds off in the distance disturbed her. Her hands were clammy, and her heart raced. She stayed close to Dover and Calen.

Naom's ears perked, and twisted.

Calen signaled the third clearing.

She peered through the tall grass stems. Heat pumped through her body. No one was visible.

In this clearing, the hide had been pulled away from the pit. The ladder was in the open entryway, facing up to the sky.

They hadn't found Tanna. Her heart pounded as she stared and tried to figure out what had happened.

Dover touched her hand and whispered. "It could be dangerous. We have to check it."

Words failed her. Even a nod would bring on tears. Zella crept forward. Once close, she bent down on her knees and crawled to the opening, spear at the ready.

She couldn't see anything inside. The sun had sunk too low. They didn't dare light a fire. Webbels could be anywhere, behind them, as well as in the pit. The hide was nearby, on the ground. She pulled it over the opening, hoping it would cause anyone inside to cry out. No sound.

Dover came up beside her. "Let me go down." He pulled a piece of plastic out of his gatherboard. Occasionally it reflected light at night.

He kissed her forehead. Then he pushed the cover back open again and slipped down into the darkness.

None of them had gone into either of the other two pits. This one was darker, dingy, and smelled of bodily wastes. How roamers could even come to these places to rape women, she had no idea. Who could live in, or even visit, such revolting conditions?

A murmur broke the silence.

Dover spoke too low to recognize the words.

Then, the murmur again.

He was back up the ladder. "There is a woman down there. She wants to die and be buried there."

Dover pulled himself out of the pit. He sat, and stared ahead. "Honestly, I don't think I could save her, even if I had medicine. I think she knows that."

He turned away to hide his tears. The stench alone would have brought tears. He had to leave the woman to die. He couldn't save her.

That would hurt him.

"Pull the ladder and close the entry. Pull the hide back across," he whispered.

Zella stared at him.

"She begged for a quick ending. It's all I can do." He turned away. Tears glistened on his cheeks. "Please, don't make her suffer any longer."

Zella wanted to offer the woman hope. Without medicine, the woman would linger in pain. Even if she survived, the invisible wounds could fester. If she didn't want to live, she wouldn't anyway. Best to give the woman her dying wish.

"What is her name?" Zella asked.

"Pandy." Dover walked back across the clearing. He left Zella to do the unpleasant job of burying the woman, barely alive.

Tears on her cheeks, she leaned down and spoke into the pit. "Pandy, do you wish to die?"

A sob echoed. "Yes. Die soon anyway, blood too much."

Zella thought that maybe the tears had gotten to her. An odd way to phrase it. Everyone should talk the same. Unless the woman had a speech impediment.

Zella stepped onto the ladder. She descended into the dark, waste infested pit. She found the woman, and grasped her clammy hand.

"Pandy."

The woman squeezed Zella's hand. Her breath rattled in her throat.

She felt for a pulse.

Pandy breathed no longer.

Zella's tears fell thick and fast as she pulled the wooden entry shut.

This woman would suffer no longer.

Zella pulled the hide across the pit entry. Before she left, she pulled up a few clods of dirt and sprinkled them across the hide. "Let Pandy's spirit bring peace, and new hope grow where the old has died."

The dirt crumpled from her hands. To be buried alive, most would find that terrifying. Zella could almost feel the comfort she had given Pandy. Much like the womb, temperatures in the pits never changed. Darkness, silence outside of dreams, and hopes for a brighter future in another life. At least this woman knew where she would be buried. Even if her last days of life were horrid, her last breaths were peaceful. "Goddess Amber, please forgive me."

Dover and Calen spoke quietly together.

She tightened her hand on her spear, and quickly caught up with them. "We can't catch back up with Fran and Monrol now," Calen said.

"We have to. We said we would," Dover said.

"They expect us to arrive with the women that should be here. Do you think we can escape with all of them, not knowing where Webbel is?"

Zella wasn't sure if she trusted Calen.

They couldn't abandon those women, and Monrol, in the Grass Sea. Those people were too weak.

Her daughter and Robin had not been in the first two pits. If they had been in the last pit, she needed to know. Those other people, the ones they had rescued, would have to fend for themselves.

"We can try to find them, I guess. Where do you think they are?" Dover asked.

Calen looked down at Naom. "Naom you have to find those women. I don't know if we can save them. We might have a better idea of what is going on. We've been away from Klapit a few days, and Blake wasn't telling me things long before that."

Zella motioned to Naom to find the trail. Not that it would be difficult. They probably took the main trail back to the hidden Webbel camp.

Naom ran back to the open pit. Her nose focused on finding the scent. She turned to the southwest, away from where they had come. Back toward the sounds they had heard earlier.

Zella raced through the grass with her spear ready. No need to hide their tracks on this trail. The Grass Sea gave a good cover, even though it could hide the roamers as well.

On they raced.

Screams sounded through the dusky evening air.

Her stomach fell as she put on a fresh burst of speed.

Naom paused in front of her, and she nearly tripped over her.

The body of a dead man, with two spears sticking out of his back was only a body length away. Gasping, and clutching her tunic, she backed up.

On the ground, a woman rubbed her wrists beside two women from Shims.

They held their finger to their lips.

Dover and Calen struggled up behind her.

"Tanna, bring my gatherboard. I have some horse meat Blake might like," Robin said.

They squatted down beside the women to listen. Creeping close, she peeked through the tall grass.

There was her daughter, backing away from Blake, and doing the bidding of a man, and her equal. That should never happen.

A woman never backed down from a man.

Robin sat on the ground in front of Blake.

She wanted to jump and run into the firelight.

The women held their arms out.

Dover grabbed Zella's arm and held her, finger to his lips.

Zella wanted to protect her daughter. She knew these women knew more about what was going on here than she did. They waited, quietly, calmly. Quan must be nearby.

She sat on her knees and waited.

"Tell me what your plan is," Robin said.



## Chapter 29

Blake laughed. "I won't tell you my plans. What did you do to my scouts?"

"Your scouts? Yes, I suppose they are yours. Orid thought they were his." Robin put his hands around his knees and leaned back.

"He did? He's too young to think that." Blake glanced around the clearing.

Tanna backed out of the clearing and hurried past Jorn. Robin wouldn't be able to talk long. She untied Sandy's rope.

Jorn helped her up onto the horse.

She held her head low so that Blake could not see her over the top of the grass.

Blake cackled again. "Well, I do need a healer, since there are none among the Webbels."

His laughter grated on Tanna's nerves.

Robin brought his arms together.

Tanna urged Sandy forward.

The other horse galloped in behind her.

Close to the fire, Sandy reared and pranced, hooves almost in Blake's face.

Blake dropped his spear.

So did the other man as he turned to the danger. The other man jumped up and stumbled backwards. He almost fell into the fire.

Robin grabbed Blake and threw a rope around his arms.

Tanna threw a rope around the neck of the unknown man. The one Tanna caught struggled.

Jorn arrived to help. Once the man was tied, much as the women had been, he no longer struggled.

Blake glared at her. "You keep secrets too."

"Not on purpose. Now, why have you allowed this to happen? You were nice when we were all children." Jorn stood over top of Blake.

"Nice? No. I never wanted to be nice. I am in control of my life."

"By taking control of other people's lives?" Tanna asked.

Sandy shifted away from the fire.

"No other way to control mine, if someone else might have the opportunity to control me."

"And, you controlling their lives is different how?" Tanna slid off the horse almost into Blake's face.

He sneered. "I'm in control, that's how."

"Blake, you always had control of your life. Maybe not how others treated you. No one has control of that," Robin said.

"Doesn't matter what I say. Anyway, you'll never do anything to me."

When Blake said that she remembered her mom. Zella could be anywhere.

Kol and Logan had disappeared before she returned for Sandy.

Blake could have even more people in the Grass Sea waiting to attack them.

Jorn, may or may not be trustworthy.

Some of those who hadn't staggered back out into the clearing might not be dead. They could be waiting to attack.

The ground began to tremble.

Tanna stumbled, and almost landed on Blake's legs. He stunk of spoiled food, dirt, and caked mud. She gasped as a plastic item fell on the ground next to him.

It rolled over and announced, "Morning Sunshine." The words sounded drawn out, almost watery.

She grabbed at it.

The waves of earth, and her stomach, subsided.

Bits of fire landed around her as she held the piece of plastic. It fit easily into her hand. Except the knob at the top. Like a knot on a tree, it stuck out. The plastic was not solid, so couldn't be melted and reused. Her fingers rubbed across a rough, brittle surface with lots of holes. It wouldn't make a good digging tool. The artifact wasn't big enough to carry anything on. What was it used for?

She touched the knob and moved it to the right carefully, so it wouldn't break off. Nothing happened. How it had spoken before? Tanna turned it over, and gently touched the other side. There were raised spots all over it, in neat orderly rows. She touched one and waited.

People crowded around her.

"You can't have that!" Blake shouted.

Tanna ignored him, and touched the knot at the top of the plastic again.

"That belongs to me. A thief has no rights," Blake said.

"Blake, if I were a thief, I would have grabbed it and hid it in my tunic. I am clearly looking at it, and would turn it over to the leaders, if they were here, for them to examine it. They know far more than I do about the ancestor's tools."

She grasped the plastic piece.

It squawked, "Time. Grumble, grumble. Man."

She stared at the artifact in her hands. It was cold, hard, and odd.

"Tanna!" Zella rushed to her and hugged her. "I've missed you so."

Tanna smiled as she waited for her mom to let go of her. Displays of affection like that were unusual.

As soon as Zella let go of her, Tanna held the talking artifact out toward her mom. "Blake had this, what is it?"

Her mother's hands trembled as they took the artifact.

Nearby, Dover checked the pulse of the man Tanna had tied up.

Tanna moved over, so Zella could be closer to the fire to see it.

She turned the artifact over, and over in her hands. "I don't know. I'll have to check some things later." Zella tucked the item in her gatherboard, safely out of Blake's reach.

"Jorn is here." Tanna said.

He had moved outside the firelight near the Grass Sea.

"I know. He will wait. I have a few new artifacts. I always compare them, and then give my reports. You will soon too, I hope."

Zella turned to Blake. "Where are Varl and Vira?"

Rumbling resounded as the ground beneath their feet shifted up and down.

"You have angered the Goddess Amber. You have caused the deaths of many people. The Mad Gods will punish you; and all of us!" Jorn strode up and grabbed Blake by the arm. "I should never have listened to a word you said! I trusted you had the right to lead."

"Enough fighting for now," Dover said. "We must try to stop the violence, and find a way to make the Goddess content again."

Jorn kicked Blake's hand. "The dead roamers must be moved from camp, so the hyenas don't attack us. Many decisions must be made. What to do with you is only one."

Jorn glared at Blake and then turned from the fire. "Zella, Dover, Marin, Irvin, we will discuss this now."

"Who will Webbel's representative be?" Blake sneered.

Jorn turned on his heel. "Until your trial, not you. No other Webbel representatives are here."

"Actually, Calen is here," Zella said.

He stared at his sister. "Fine."

Jorn relaxed his shoulders. "If you trust him, send him along." He stalked off to his gatherboard at the edge of the clearing.

"Is he okay?" The grandmother's words echoed in her memory.

"He was always different. Never was calm like our mom." Zella sighed and waved to Calen and Dover.

Robin reached for her hand. "We will join them."

"Robin, they are going to want to know what we did at the village," Tanna whispered as she shivered.

He bent over and kissed her forehead. "It will be fine. You did what you had to do."

She could only hope so. She felt as if she were walking to her own trial as she stepped into the circle waiting for her and Robin. Her fear must be similar to the fear Orid should have felt, and perhaps Fendon felt on that night not so long ago. The heat from the day had long since left the land, and her heart.

With Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala missing, it felt empty. As if half their community were gone. Only one representative was available from Webbel, Almond, and Tuttle. One might be all there was for quite a while.

Tanna stared at the ground. The leaders did not know her shame. She lifted her head up to everyone's stare. Heat rushed to her face, and she felt dizzy.

Robin reached for her hand.

Jorn glanced around the small group. "Okay, anyone can hear us. I have sent some of our men to help with digging a burial area. Others are guarding the women and children at the main camp. We all need updates."

"You must have come through after we did. It was empty when we came through," Robin said.

Jorn smiled. "We were right behind you. It was odd seeing two horses going through the grass together. They don't usually come

near the camps. I knew Blake had said he was going to try to catch a few. I didn't know he had. I thought the horses were part of his group. We thought we had fight on our hands before we realized it was you."

"So you were hunting us, hunting the Webbels," Robin said.

Jorn nodded. "Can you blame me?"

Tanna remembered something the Grandmother had said. "How much do you know?"

Jorn glared at her, and then looked down at his hands. "Yes, I feel this is partly my fault. I gave Blake permission to find things. He felt he had found something important, and wanted to see if he could find more of them. I didn't know what they were. Those poor women. I have no idea who they are." His shoulders heaved with dry, quiet sobs.

"Brother, you did nothing wrong. You have asked Dover and I both to look at things for a while to decide if there is anything to share with the community." Zella placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I hope Goddess Amber agrees with you," Jorn whispered.

"Tanna, Robin, can you tell us about your adventure?" Dover asked.

Tanna took a deep breath.

Dover had pulled the attention from Jorn to help him avoid losing face as a leader.

What Jorn would say when he knew what his niece had done?

"It was difficult. We didn't know what to expect. Uden hurt her ankle. We saw a lion kill a camel with a newborn, and it imprinted on Rusty. We took the baby camel back to Erin, and she gave us Betty for Uden to ride. Then, we made it to Almond."

Robin squeezed her hand.

She continued the tale as it had unfolded. The memory of Glenna's mother, and the fear Orid had provoked did not go unspoken. "I did what I felt I had to do. Robin didn't disagree. And the Goddess didn't punish us then." She pulled the horse statue from her tunic.

"See, it even looks like Sandy. The gen four grandmother wanted to keep her, and grandsponsor almost died. Maybe he is dead now," Tanna said.

Robin squeezed her arm. "She did a wonderful job. There will be food for the winter. Even if the harvests are late. She took care of the justice, and let the Goddess decide."

Jorn placed his palm across his face. "How bad?"

"Not bad," Tanna said. "Several people hurt, some women, well, we needn't talk about that. Orid and his followers, the Goddess gave them a just punishment within the allotted days."

Jorn's face contorted and his hands twisted from his mixed feelings.

He wasn't at fault. Maybe some of his decisions had allowed Blake and Orid to change, and become the danger they had. Dover and Zella had been able to discover the correct choice on their own.

"Blake always spoke to me in private," Jorn said. "I always thought it was because he was unsure, not that he was sure. How could I be so blind?"

"You were no blinder than I. I was dumb enough to stay at Klapit for six seasons or more, I've lost count. No one even missed me in summer camp. I am sorry," Calen said.

Jorn turned to him. "Six seasons in one place? I'd forget everything, and everyone I knew."

Calen laughed. "Maybe that's what happened to Orid. As for me, I liked it. The peace and quiet were wonderful in between seasons. I would dig where, and when, Blake told me to."

"You never did talk much," Zella said.

"No, I don't like to. I asked Blake if you and Dover would stay as well, or Varl and Vira. He always said he had asked you, and to never bring it up again, or mention it to you." Calen twisted his hands. "I never thought he wasn't telling the truth. I am sorry."

"It sounds like our group had it the worst, expect maybe for Varl and Vira," Jorn said. "A Tuttle child was killed when Blake's roamer scouts attacked our group while we were hunting."

"We need to find Varl and Vira," Zella said.

"No," Calen said. Everyone turned to him. His face turned red.

"Okay." He held up his hands. "For you maybe. For me, it's to find those women from the pits and make sure they made it to the Shells community safe. I have to help these women from the third pit there as well."

"They remnants of Shell?" Tanna asked.

"You know about them?" Calen turned to her.

"Rusty and her baby brother are safe in Almond."

Calen smiled. "One less worry at least, as long as no roamer scouts are out that way. I have no idea how many there are. I'm not even sure Blake knows."

"Okay," Jorn said. "It sounds like we have a plan, maybe. Half make sure the lost people arrive at Shells, and half find Varl and Vira."

"We may need people at the winter camps too," Dover said.

"We can't split up again. We need to stay together," Zella said.

"I have an idea," Calen said. "Shells relocated camp should be on the way to Westpit. Blake probably had Varl and Vira sent to one, or the other. We should go to both anyway."

"Almond is unprotected," Zella said.

"No, Mom. Almond is as safe as we are. They have six hunters as well as Rusty. They are all together in Almond camp, and doing normal summer chores. We made the garden big enough for everyone. Though our gardener thought they could check on Lava's garden as well. There should be plenty of food."

"That isn't many," Jorn said. "A decision has to be made about Blake as well."

Marin and Irvin hadn't said anything other than to grunt approval or disapproval.

In fact, Tanna couldn't remember ever hearing of them joining in any debates. "How long to find the Shells camp?"

"We could be there in a few march's walk. It will take two days to reach Westpit," said Calen.

"How about we go as far as Shells before we decide. We need more information to make a final decision on Blake," Tanna said.

"Wise woman. Perhaps you should have been my daughter." Jorn watched her.

Tanna smiled. She couldn't lead both the group, and the digging operations. That wasn't allowed, for the real fear of becoming what Blake had become. It was nice to know he appreciated her. She could choose. Her Mom could train Rusty to follow her. It had been done before.

"So, a quick nap, then go to Shells at daylight?" Tanna asked.

"Everyone agree?"

No one disagreed.

She reached for Robin's hand and pulled him off to where they could have a screen of Grass Sea between them and everyone else.



# Chapter 30

Zella had been about to speak when Dover turned the conversation to Tanna. Tanna knew how to turn the attention away from Jorn when he most needed it. At the Almond villa, she had made a decision that affected the lives of everyone, and carried it through. Even here, when she could have given up that bit of power to Robin, she didn't. Thankfully, it didn't go to her head. Tanna asked if her ideas were best, and they were. She thought of her community, not only herself, as Blake and Orid had done.

"May she never fall into their trap." She settled down beside Dover for a nap.

"Don't think she will," Dover said. "She'll be a good leader. Question is; will she follow you, or Jorn?"

"She didn't train to follow Jorn."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

Zella wondered into dreamland thinking about the artifact Tanna had taken from Blake. Something about it was important. She couldn't quite remember what. Never mind, it would come when Goddess Amber was ready for her to know. Hopefully, they could appease her soon, preferably without more bloodshed.

A noise in camp woke her up. She sat up and wiped her eyes until they focused around her.

People talked, and packed for the trip to the Shells villa.

Surely, all the women in the pits were from Shells. She ought to speak to one to find out, maybe the woman with Monrol. Fran, that was her name.

The group gathered around the now cool fire pit.

Jorn held his hand up for silence. "If no one objects, we will follow Calen for now."

No one spoke aloud, though a few murmurs could be heard.

"Calen, you may lead, as you know best where we are going. Take Blake with you, and I will follow behind with his friend. Anyone who has trouble keeping up, please shout so we will hear you."

"With the horses, Tanna and I can ride ahead, and behind the group, to watch for stragglers." Robin hefted his gatherboard.

"Good idea," Jorn said. "Let's go then."

Calen didn't move until Zella gave him a gentle nudge. He turned red, picked up his huntboard, and walked off.

Blake tottered by his side with his hands tied in front of him, and head down.

This walk through the Grass Sea was different than any Zella could remember. For one thing, she wasn't alone in front, or with only her daughter for company, and the sounds of the rest of her villa barely heard behind her.

Today, at the front of the line, she was surrounded by people. Conversations of the hunters constantly changed location and tone. It was more confusing than a Fall Trade meeting. Conversations, attention to the ground, sky, and avoiding stepping on someone, or in a prairie dog hole, overwhelmed an otherwise fascinating journey into the unknown.

Zella wondered how the women from the last pit fared. As light skinned as they were, they would burn easy in the sunlight. Maybe that was why Tanna wanted them to hurry in the early morning. The women should have walked through the night, if they had been able to recover safely. To be brought out of a tomb, then walk through unseen dangers might be more dangerous. Better to risk sunburn.

Tanna rode up on her horse and spoke to Calen.

Calen did not answer immediately.

Zella wasn't close enough to hear her.

Jorn hurried over; listened to their words, and held his hand up in the halt signal. "We should be about halfway there. Drink some water. Conditions at Shells will not be like our known villas."

Some of the people behind them murmured. The people wanted to hurry on. They were healthy. The rescued women had slipped through the row, and were no longer visible in the crowd.

Tanna rode up to her. "The women need to rest, one has a new baby."

"All the women with new babies are at the winter camps," Cherie from Tuttle said.

Tanna smiled at her. "Cherie, I know you did not see the rescued women last night. Several men and only a few women did. Ten women are following behind us. Many can barely walk. Perhaps, it would be nice if a few strong women and children

helped them. They have no gatherboards, and couldn't carry one if they did right now."

The woman's face turned red. "No one told me."

"That's okay. Those women had a meal late last night. It was their first real meal in more than a season. If they hadn't been healthy long ago, they would all be dead now."

Tanna turned from the woman to Zella. "Mom, go ahead with Calen and Dover."

"Is there anything I can do? Were they all from Shells?"

Tanna laughed, almost her carefree childish laugh.

Zella had missed it.

"Stay here, near the front of the group. Jorn may need you. No, I think they are from many places. I heard strange words from some, words I have never heard. I wonder what they were saying to each other."

Tanna smiled at her, and leaned over the horse's neck. The horse walked back down the line, now nearly two hundred people in length. She rode, almost as if she had ridden a horse all her life.

Robin arrived and spoke to Jorn and Calen.

The sun warmed the ground and dried the dew from the night before. During the next march, Zella noticed the pace had slowed some. Calen may have tried to slow for the women, and himself. They could walk for longer at a slower pace.

Jorn waited for her to catch up with him; allowing the few people between them to move ahead of him. "Calen says we are almost there. I can see smoke."

Zella hadn't noticed the smoke above the grass until he said something. Too old to lead if she missed that. If her vision was going, she would definitely no longer be allowed to lead the trade travels.

A scream from ahead shattered her thoughts.

Zella and Jorn ran.

Calen was on the ground, holding Blake down by the ankles as Blake tried to drag him along.

"That cry will bring my scouts. They can have you all." Blake's laughter was loud and clear.

"There are more of us than you realize Blake. By the way, the rest of your birth villa is with us." Jorn grabbed Blake and held him still.

"I don't care about them. If they don't fight with my scouts, the scouts can have them."

No one with so little regard for human life had lived in recent memory. Many ancestor's tales shared what could happen when such attitudes became common among the people. At least Jorn, and the rest of the council could make the decision the Goddess Amber required to keep peace in the community. Turning him loose to be a roamer wouldn't be safe.

The people of the villas hurried forward, crowding close. Many had heard what Blake said. Women and small children were pushed to the center of the group. Women would fight, though not all cared to.

They waited, listening. The grasslands were unusually quiet. No wind, no grasses rustled. No lions roared. Only the column of smoke ahead, drifted on the breeze.

Robin and Tanna rode up on their horses.

"Go," Jorn said. "Look carefully, and quietly."

Tanna and Robin raced off in the direction of the smoke signals.

Zella grew restless waiting for Tanna and Robin to return. She paced with the hunters, spear ready for trouble from any direction.

Tanna rode back into the hastily made clearing, alone. She waved to Jorn.

Her pale face hid whatever she had seen.

Jorn hurried the hunters together, and pushed the Shims healers to the front of the line.

The horse trotted back to Zella.

"What did you see?"

The noise around her escalated as people hurried by.

"More later." Tanna waved as Sandy raced back toward the smoke.

Zella gasped as she ran to catch her daughter. She hadn't heard what had happened.

Dover ran beside her.

They left the villa group behind.

It was too far of a run for the smoke of a fire pit.

Soon, they reached a clearing.

Zella clapped her hand to her mouth as she surveyed the scene.

A few lodges nestled around the perimeter, mostly untouched. People, mostly men and a few gen four women, sat in front of them. Some cried. Some stared ahead blankly, as if they saw nothing.

Smoke rose from what was usually an open clearing in most villas, the main trade meeting place. Here however, had apparently been a treasury even larger than several villa's treasuries put together.

Now, it was a massive smoldering ruin. Bits of charred and smoldered wood crumpled around the edges. A few stones, now blackened, surrounded the burnt area. The column of smoke from the center floated off on a breeze high above the Grass Sea.

Zella glanced at all the people not moving, not noticing. She rushed forward wondering how this fire could have begun and ended without igniting the Grass Sea.

Tanna and Robin were on the other side of the smoke column.

Zella peered inside the burned-out shell. Inside were the charred remains of typical villa belongings, looms, boxes, and more burnt to barely recognizable pieces. Odd spots nestled among the ashes. They didn't look right. Her mind raced as she tried to connect what she saw, with what she knew.

Flickering cinders burned all around her feet. The closest strange pile was out of reach. She couldn't place what it was. There was material, like cloth, maybe a pile of tunics and shawls.

She grabbed a stick, and poked the spot. Ashes fell down to reveal the arm bones and skull of a person, grinning hideously as it stared back at her. The lower jaw bone opened.

Zella shrank back in fear, right into Dover's arms.

The material, possibly a shawl, had covered the face as it burned.

Tanna came around the corner. "They trapped some of the roamers. They know where hot air is, and blew it into the lodge. Once the fire started, several of the women Blake's men had raped jumped in on top. They couldn't live after what had happened to them, their families, and their villa."

Zella reached for her.

"Mom, I have to stay here, and take care of the people who are left, don't I? This is my punishment. Goddess Amber shuddered last night, before they destroyed the building. She quaked until the fire engulfed them all." Tanna's tears streaked through dust and soot.

Zella held her close. She didn't know what the Goddess wanted or expected. If the Goddess was speaking to this villa, was she also speaking to rest of them, as they had gathered around the fire pit and found the item Blake had hid? She wondered if it was the Mad Gods wakening, or the Rio.

Jorn appeared beside her.

Zella comforted her daughter. She was after all, barely a gen two adult, and had made more mature decisions than was normal for a young woman her age. A release of emotions might be what she needed.

Jorn waited until the tears subsided. "Tanna. We will all rest here. The women who were in the last pit will remain here with Zella, Dover, and Calen. Calen isn't able to go further."

Tanna wiped her eyes and looked up at him. "Please."

Jorn reached to hold her chin. "Young woman, this isn't your fault. I need you and Robin. With your help, and those horses, maybe we can prevent it from happening again. There is one more place we have to find, and fast."

"I'm not sure what I wanted. It wasn't this. Everything was so predictable. Now, it isn't. I hope Rusty and her brother are okay," Tanna sniffled.

"Did you ever name the child?" Zella asked.

"No." Tanna wiped her eyes.

"Perhaps we need to have a ceremony for the Goddess, beg for forgiveness, and name the child."

"I have to help Robin."

Zella sighed. Her daughter didn't want to be trail leader, which meant she wouldn't be a spiritual leader as well. Zella had never taught her some of the ceremonies. Maybe though, they were ready to change the ceremonies. She might be able to find and train someone else. Perhaps Rusty, or one of the orphans here.

Tanna walked away. She glanced through the incoming crowd and called villa members from all villas by name; directing them

where to go, and what to do to help. No one complained, though she was half the age of most of the people she directed.

Jorn chuckled softly. "Zella, I think our world is changing again. People never stay the same long, do they? Maybe we have perfected our skills separately too long. Tanna is going to be an interesting leader. I'm going to help Quan set up a healing tent."

Jorn hurried off, leaving Zella to her thoughts. She had no interest in healing people. She preferred the spiritual leadership aspect. Or, maybe not even that. After all, she had rarely been called on for spiritual needs other than for birth or death. Coming of age events were usually held at Klapit. Quan led that event for everyone.

Her best option was to be sure the fire was completely out, and gather the bones. A long lonely task, one no one else would disturb her while doing.

# Chapter 31

Tanna rushed ahead on her horse with Robin by her side. A fire in the grass could be deadly, and they didn't know of any water to hide in near here. People could die.

They reached the clearing almost before they saw it. The horses didn't want to go further.

The scene before her was shocking.

A few people wondered around, as if lost.

Children huddled together and cried.

Men watched the smoldering remains in the center of the Grass Sea clearing.

She urged Sandy forward to one of the men. "What happened?"

Spears were thrust in their faces. "If you had been here sooner, you could have joined them. No other women have willingly been on a horse. Not one so young and pretty."

"We aren't part of Blake's scouts. Please. All of Shims, Lava, Almond, and Tuttle are behind us. They will be here soon."

Sandy shifted backwards from the spears.

One man grunted. "Do they have horses too?"

"No. These came to us when we allowed the Goddess to destroy Orid and his roamer friends."

Spears aimed at Tanna's face, lowered as the men almost relaxed.

"Robin is from Shims. They have medical knowledge. What can we do to help you?"

One man looked around the clearing and said, "Doesn't look like much, does it? We listened to their dreams. We thought we were doing what our Goddess wanted."

"Rusty said that," Tanna said.

"Rusty? You know Rusty?" The man closest to her head pointed the spear closer. "Where is she?"

"As safe as any of us. Rusty is in Almond villa. Leading the gen four adults, and new mothers," Tanna said.

The man stared at her.

"Rusty wanted us to find her family," Tanna said.

"We are what's left of it. The scouts are burned alive. And nearly all of the women jumped in as well. They couldn't live, knowing the



pain Blake's scouts had given them. I wish there was some other way. They would not pass it on to their children."

Loss had shown in Rusty's eyes and shoulders. It had not given her the depth and magnitude of what had happened here. Even at the meeting, when Calen had spoken of what happened to the women kept captive in the pits, it had seemed unreal.

Here in this villa, with the burnt remains in the center, children cried, and men gazed about as if they had no idea who they were, where they were, or what do now.

Tanna had to give these people hope, something they could do. "Can you men bring water? We need to be sure the fire is out, and decide what the Goddess wants done with the bones of the dead. This reminder in the center of your villa will be difficult for all of you."

The men stared at her. "You want to help?"

"Yes," Tanna said. "I'll hurry the rest of our group here. Robin, you stay. Check on these people." She turned Sandy around and raced back to find Jorn and Calen.

Much work needed to be done. Her mom and Jorn would be here soon. She wanted to go on to Westpit, though she knew she should stay here. These people needed her.

So too did Rusty. She wanted even more to return to her, and be sure she was safe. Of course, Rusty was a day east of here. No going back. Or, any way to hear from her, if she needed help. She would need all the help of Goddess Amber. Surely, as many roamers as had died, there were few left to plague the remaining people.

Sandy reached Jorn and Calen.

"Hurry. Shells is burnt." Tanna raced to Zella.

She hurried to catch up to Robin so that they could discuss the correct ceremony. After all, nothing like this had ever happened before. This village, as well as each of their own villas, would require emotional, as well as physical healing. It would be a long road to recovery. Even the land had to recover.

Robin wrapped the burnt hand of child.

The little girl, with stringy hair, was dressed in rags, and covered in dirt. A whimper squeaked out as Robin tied the bandage. She

wiped her tear-stained cheeks with a grimy hand, and looked up at Tanna, "Why did she have to die?"

Tanna's heart leapt. The child appeared only a little younger than Rusty.

"Come, child." Tanna squatted on the ground.

Robin hurried to his next patient.

"Tell me about your mom."

The girl sat on her lap, and turned her head to gaze up into Tanna's eyes. "She was so nice till the bad men came."

The little girl rubbed her eyes with clenched fists. "The men started the fire to burn the bad men. Mom jumped in. She screamed. At least, I think she did. There was much screaming. I tried to pull her out."

The little girl lifted her wrapped hand, as tears threatened to brim over.

Tanna snuggled her closer. "Dear child, it'll be okay. Your mom was in pain. Perhaps she felt she couldn't live with the pain."

She remembered something Robin had said about his own villa. "Was your mom a healer?"

The little girl nodded and snuggled closer to Tanna. "Why did she leave me behind? I have no other family." Tears slid down the child's cheeks, leaving clean trails through the soot.

Emotional pain could be worse than physical pain, simply because it went unnoticed. "What is your name?"

"Ambrena."

Tanna smiled and patted the child's back. "You will be fine."

"Scared of those men," the little girl said.

Tanna held the child. Comfort was what Ambrena needed right now, not words, or action. Those would come later. Tanna now had three orphans from this evil calamity to worry about. There must be many more. She hugged Ambrena close.

The man she had directed to go bring water earlier approached her with a gourd of water. He held out the gourd for the child.

Soon, Ambrena decided she had been held enough. She crawled out of Tanna's lap, and wondered off to where some other children played in the dirt.

Tanna watched her go, and wondered what would happen to all the orphans. Zella could take one, or maybe two. Dover had taken

Robin in when his mother had died. That was different though, Dover had been Robin's sponsor. He had also been the only orphan.

Here, there were many. Some of the children might have a living mom, though she might not be able to care for herself, or her child. If the child was old enough, they would be able to help her. If not, they might be a burden. Some moms and children might reunite later, others never would.

Tanna found Robin again.

"I think I have all the visible wounds wrapped. Dover is taking care of the last few. Glad to help, and that we will be going soon."

"Robin, all these orphans, how many?"

He groaned and gazed around the community. "Too many. These people can't stay here. The reminder will be too much."

"They can't go home. They wouldn't be able to reestablish their homes and prepare for winter. They've been here too long. With no women, there will be no more children if they are sent away. And if they stay, Goddess Amber will be further angered."

Robin took her hand. "Their old homes were burned. That is why they were forced here. They thought Blake was offering them safety. He probably sent the roamers to burn their homes."

Tanna wasn't surprised. "Where is Blake now?"

"In the leader's home, tied up so much he can't move. I don't think he will escape again."

"They couldn't go back if they wanted to, could they?"

"There are too many orphans, and little contact with other people for generations. They need the contact now. It has almost been their ruin. Staying could be their only hope."

"Let's go then. We have a lot to prepare for the ceremony. I think it should be at dawn to symbolize a new beginning. Or maybe both. A death ceremony, and a re-birth ceremony."

Robin smiled at her.

The day passed as Tanna planned the ceremony. She wanted to work uninterrupted.

Zella came to see her, and left.

It was Tanna's responsibility.

The villas gathered as evening approached. Usually, in their villas, a bonfire, and evening meal was always in the center of the

village. A place to gather, share reports of the day, plan for the next day, and tell tales.

No one knew exactly where to go, or what to do here.

Healing had to begin. Tanna jumped up and called the women who usually cooked on trips. Between two lodges was a large open area. She had no idea where this villa had cooked together in the past, of if they had.

As the food simmered, she called all the people together.

Jorn and Zella waited off to the side, Robin beside her.

She waited, standing as everyone around sat down.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Tonight is a night of mourning. We all mourn for many things. While for many, the sorrow will last, tonight we all share in it. We must remember, grief is often invisible. Although someone appears happy, they may suffer inside."

She handed Robin a basket. "I will pass this basket around. Everyone, even the youngest child, will add a clump of dirt. As you add it, say silently to yourself all the things you mourn tonight."

Tanna picked up her clump of dirt. As it slid between her fingers into the basket, she mourned her passing childhood, the peace she hadn't valued until it was gone, and the simple life they had all known, for the confusion they would now know. She held the basket while Robin added his dirt, meeting her eyes as it passed through his fingers.

Of course, many more baskets would be passed around. One would not be enough for the number of people gathered.

After what seemed a day, the baskets were gathered in front of Tanna along with a few gourds of water. A horse's pelvic bone platter was at her feet. She pulled out a handful of dirt from each basket and poured it on the platter with a little water. "I will combine the mourning of us all into new figurines to represent the joining of our sorrows. Please eat your meal while I do."

She, and a few others, turned to the task of creating clay figures. It wouldn't take long. They were not meant to be beautiful, as they were built as a memory of pain.

Zella watched what she was doing with an odd look on her face.

Tanna blushed. It should have been Uden's place to create the clay figurines. They had been close friends while Odalen had been

alive, playing together with clay and colors. Maybe her sponsor had been a clay designer, though she didn't know who he was. She had never asked.

The people spoke little as they ate. They glanced at the small group making the figurines, calmer and quieter than she could remember any trade meeting every being. Even the dogs didn't run or bark.

Tanna's figure began to take shape, that of a bear. Odd. No group was known by the bear. No known group, that is. In fact, bears were only a distant memory, spoken of, and never seen alive by anyone in the five villas.

The bear, largest of the clay figures, stood first. A giant seashell represented Shells, a cube represented Lava, a spear represented Webbel, a pot represented Shims, a flute represented Almond, and a clay rope represented Tuttle.

Silence filled the clearing as Tanna stood with the figures at her feet.

"Our ceremonial leader could not be here. We must find the missing dig leaders. Tonight, we will do what we can."

She held the clay flute for all to see. "A thing that should be of exquisite beauty."

Marin played an eerie tune on her flute.

"May your creation bring new life to our community. May you help us find Varl, Sharel, and the other missing people." She took the item and placed it in a bake box next to the fire.

Robin took the clay rope in his hands. "Vira and Nala are also missing among us. May they be found unharmed. May all of the damage done to the Tuttle family, here, and at winter camp, be undone." He placed the rope in the box as well.

Tanna took up the clay spear. "May the spear that pierced our side lose its power to bite. While we do not wish injury on those who harmed us, we will stand up to them. May this spear take all the pain the spear throwers have caused and send it to Goddess Amber with our dreams."

A tear slid down her cheek. She was almost afraid she was condemning people to no longer be able to use spears to hunt, or fend for themselves.

Robin took the clay pot in his hands and held it high. "May this pot, which can gather the power of lightning, gather all the pain in our villas, and in our land, allowing them to heal." He carefully placed the pot inside the box.

Tanna took the clay bear up and held it for all to see. "We have always had our individual villas, our individual lands, and individual knowledge. Though we have tried to share with those who wished to know as much as possible, perhaps we have not done enough. Perhaps, instead of being individual villas, alone, someone will look out for the whole community. This bear chose to form in my hands. For tonight, the bear guides and protects all us. May he send his voice to the Goddess to ask for her protection, and forgiveness."

Tanna placed the bear into the bake box.

Ambrena stepped beside her with a small piece of clay in her hands, and squished it as tight as she could. She dropped it in the box. Each child came up, grabbed a handful of dirt, mixed it in the water, and dropped it in the box.

Tanna hadn't asked them to participate. She couldn't tell them no. This was their ceremony, as much as hers. Tears streamed down many cheeks, as young adults, and then older adults, filed up to the baskets to pull together some clay and drop it in. Some dropped in two, one for the missing, or dead.

As they settled back down, Tanna knew they expected something spectacular. She hoped they wouldn't be disappointed.

A few of the young men brought armfuls of charred bones to Tanna and sat them on the ground at her feet.

"As we burn these clay figures, let us also burn the bones of our enemies. We will send the smoke to the Goddess to ask for her protection." She gazed around the assembled people. "We also burn the bones of those who chose to die. They wished to speak directly to Goddess Amber in hopes of bringing peace and happiness back to their homelands. Let us grant their last request."

She placed bones in the box. A few had cloth scraps on them. The bones would burn hot. Hot enough to melt the clay. She hoped she remembered everything the gen four grandmother from Tuttle had told her about making clay pots. She had to do it right.

Tanna placed grass and wood inside the box and lit the fire. She waited until it burned to place the lid loosely on top. More fuel would

be added throughout the night and upcoming days. She glanced around as the crowd watched her expectantly. "Marin, would you please choose someone to begin the tales for tonight?"

People seemed to accept that the initial part of the ceremony was over. However, they glanced at the bake box frequently throughout the early tales. More ceremony would come, once the travelers returned from Westpit.

## Chapter 32

Watching the ceremony instead of participating, even in the limited way she would if Jorn or Marin lead it, left Zella with a cold and distant feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her arms shivered. She sat as far from the fire pit as possible for a good view of Tanna's first conducted ceremony. From here, she could reach her quickly, if needed. Tanna had asked her a few questions, and consulted with Jorn and Marin before she began the ceremony.

Her daughter had created the ceremony all on her own. No similar ceremony had ever been held in living memory, or even in the recited tales that Zella could remember. She should know them all, though Calen had proven that at least Webbel knew of tales unknown to other villas.

Zella had raised her daughter to be a quiet, calm dig leader, much like herself. She could never stand up in front of this crowd and create a ceremony that had never been done before. She had trouble conducting a common ceremony in Lava villa. Without Jorn as her brother, she never would have succeeded.

"She knows what she is doing. I'm so glad," Marin said.

"I thought you would want to do it."

Marin laughed. "No, Zella. I am quiet, like you. I have to visit Shims for help before I face a crowd. Even the people we know. This crowd is almost half people we don't know. Our villas need someone with her skill and confidence. I hope it never goes into hiding."

Perhaps her shiny eyes at ceremonies should have given it away. She had been good at hiding her dislike of crowds.

Tanna placed the clay figures in the box. She moved easy, sure of herself, not halting. Even the child, Ambrena's unexpected addition, didn't startle her. Her daughter went along as if it were all planned.

Jorn touched her arm. "We should go in behind the crowd. You were once that confident Zella. She will be a great leader."

She turned to her brother. Yes, maybe she had been confident, before her son died. Confidence never returned after his death.

"What leadership role will she fill? There isn't an open one."



"The Goddess has spoken," Marin said. They approached Tanna, last in line to make a clay finger cast. "We need a ruler for all the rulers to go to, as the villas will now spread out, to remain closer together. The bear says it all. A mother bear protects her young."

Zella dropped her clay piece in the box and moved off with Marin and Jorn. "I don't want my daughter running between villas. She was raised to be a dig leader, not a runner. I want to keep her close. Tanna is all I have, and I am ready to stay at Lava villa more."

"We all are," Marin said. "We will see what the new way brings. It will keep some of the old, and some of the new, which may be older than we think."

People walked to their sleeping camp on the ground.

Dover found her and sat beside her.

"I'll have to wake early."

"I know. We all will."

Early the next morning, Zella rolled over to find Dover awake and gone already. With most of Shims villa here, they would tend to the sick. Even if it meant being away from Dover, she was glad to not have to help those hurt in the fire.

The fire pit glowed, illuminating Tanna squatted among the Shims medicinal vessels.

Zella walked over to her daughter.

"Tea?" Tanna stood over a container of simmering water.

Zella nodded.

"I am trying to be both what you want, and what I want. I want you to care for Rusty and Ambrena for me." Tanna handed her a gourd of warm tea.

"You aren't going to be away Tanna. We all need you. I need you."

"Mom you never finished grieving. I never could have replaced my brother. I never wanted to. I could never be what you wanted for him. I don't want to be on the outskirts of the village. I want to be on the inside, part of the daily events. Don't think I don't care. I do." Tanna reached out to her mom.

She didn't want her daughter to be someone she wasn't. Bravery had once been easy. It had to be, with Jorn to be taken care of while they were both too young to be an adult, and no one had any room in their lodges to take them in. "You can care for Ambrena and Rusty. You'll be there some." Zella fought to keep from crying.

Tanna smiled. "Some. Not for a while though. Robin and I may be busy. We have talked about living like the people from Shells and Mills. A couple lives together more than a summer meeting. It might be confusing to the girls if it doesn't work. And we need to be together for the work we need to do to rebuild our community, now six villas strong."

Like the tale she and Dover had struggled to comprehend. Maybe people did live like that once, or maybe they were meant to. She was used to being independent. Adults lived singly until old now; they couldn't live together. Maybe the next gen could.

Jorn had once talked about fighting blood. And how, when it no longer flowed so strong, people could live in better harmony with each other. It couldn't be now, not with all the bloodshed of the last few battles. It wasn't over. Westpit waited to be found and rescued. And Blake to atone for his crimes, both the direct, and the indirect ones.

"At least through summer. We all have to figure out how this will affect us, all these new people. I have to be ready for this morning's ceremony." Tanna stood up and almost walked off before glancing back.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Zella sat her gourd down.

"Find Ambrena and have her ready when we start."

Zella finished her tea. People woke up and joined her. Normally, she would walk off by herself, or with Dover, out of people's way. Once she hadn't done that. Today, though, wasn't the day to try to listen to idle chatter. Her daughter would be calling the community together soon, and needed her help. She left her empty gourd by the fire, and strolled off in search of Ambrena.

Soon, most of the camp gathered around the fire pit for something warm to eat, and to prepare food for those going to Westpit.

Jorn stood up and waited on silence. "People of Shells and surrounding communities, this is not a good place for you to stay. Please prepare to join us in our winter homes. We will make room for you. You will have a few days to gather your things. As our group that goes forth today returns, we will stay one night, and then all return to our winter homes. There will be much to do."

He stepped aside.

Tanna stepped into view. "People of many communities, we must come together. As a person dies, their soul travels through bleakness before it finds the light. I go forth with the hunters today. When I return, our multitude of communities will be re-born together as one."

She gazed at the group as a whole. "For many gens, we have kept to ourselves. We have forced a style of dependence on ourselves, and each other that is no longer needed. We will change. Perhaps, we may find that it is better to all live together and share in one community, rather than many smaller individual communities."

Tanna waved to Ambrena.

Ambrena pulled away from Zella's arms to stand beside Tanna.

"We have always had a role to grow into," Ambrena said.

"That won't change. You will simply have more choices, and opportunities to learn new things."

"Will skilled people leave our villas?" One woman asked.

A good question. Zella rubbed her hands. She wouldn't leave Lava, though others might.

"I don't think so. Everyone will be encouraged to choose a skill, and learn it well, with a general knowledge of other skills, much as we have now. Wouldn't it be nice for a rope maker to say to a toolmaker the size, shape, and weight of a tool they need? They need to know more of both skills in order to be able to do so."

Tanna scanned the crowd, looking for questions.

A good answer. One she had asked when Odalen died and left Uden untrained. Without a clay designer, word tablets had become rare. The young children wouldn't learn the written language, and wouldn't be able to read the artifacts.

"I can learn more than one skill?" Ambrena said.

Tanna placed her hand on Ambrena's shoulder. "Yes. In fact, I hope everyone learns a little of multiple skills. We have a villa right now full of people who cannot make a knife to cut their meat, or a spear to hunt a deer. Some of the Webbel villa who can create cutting tools are here. Many have died. What tools and techniques have we lost forever because their apprentices did not learn them?" She lifted Ambrena's hand into the air.

"We have tried equality by each person having only one main skill and purpose in life. If that person becomes sick and dies, or is no longer able to work, we lose too much. If the gardener becomes sick, we have no food in winter. If the toolmaker is no longer there, we cannot hunt for food or furs. We must relearn to work together, and keep the knowledge more equally shared."

The crowd murmured.

"Who will watch the bone fires for me?"

Four young people from Almond stood up.

Her daughter had earned her fiery heart from somewhere. A share of that fire would be needed to survive the coming days.

"I want everyone to learn more about pottery from these young adults. It is important in the rebirth of our community." Tanna turned to go.

One man from Shells hollered. "What about Blake?"

Tanna glanced at Jorn before turning back to the assembled people. "Goddess Amber has left that decision to the leaders who will remain while I am gone. We all agree on the evils this shell of a man has created?"

Tears stung Zella's eyes. So much wisdom in her now gen two daughter. Someone else must have been teaching her as well. A good thing. If Tanna had stayed in their lodge as much as Zella wanted, she'd be shier than Ambrena.

A few people cheered.

"Then let the decision be made by those left to care for this community. Too many decisions made by one person keep each of you from making your own."

"Shared power is always fairer," Jorn said. "Good luck!"

Tanna picked up her gatherboard.

It was the signal that the travelers were leaving for Westpit.

Ambrena ran crying up to Zella as they left. Almost all the men, and many of the women, had gone. A few stayed behind to help Shells prepare to leave.

Dover stood beside her.

Calen, with a gourd of tea in his hands, was nearby.

In the distance, Fran and Monrol stood apart from the rest of the group.

Zella took Ambrena's hand. She breathed deep and walked across the field to where Fran and Monrol were.

"Glad you all made it safely here," she said.

Monrol hid his face.

Fran prodded him. "No hiding. Tell."

Something was odd about Fran's word order.

"We're from far northeast. Many are." Fran glared at Monrol.

Fran took Zella's hand. "We saved Shells. Scouts attacked. Were going to burn the villa. Nothing to come back to."

She took a deep breath and slowed down. "Heard them talk. Waited til they raced into the villa. We attacked the scouts with rocks. Shells woke up and attacked back. Without all, none would have survived the night."

Ambrena's hand clutched Zella's tighter.

"We chased the scouts into the building. So many women chose to die. Tried to stop them," Monrol said.

Zella reached out her arm to the man. He, like everyone else here, was in a state of shock.

"There were other ways," Dover said.

"Other ways?"

"Monrol, among our people, and Shells, the women can't keep a child of a roamer attack. A child doesn't deserve to grow up despised like that. We have herbs that can prevent it. They can't cure the internal wounds though," Dover said.

"Not all such children turn out like Blake. Many women had children from roamers," Fran said. "Never want to give up my child."

"You came here without children," Zella said.

"Sickness came. Only daughter died. Few families left looking for a new place. Give up a child, unbelievable," Fran stepped back.

Zella reached out to her. "My son died, and he was wanted. I know the feelings that gave me. Imagine seeing the eyes of your

attacker every day in your child's eyes. Or, reaching out to grab you with your attacker's tiny grubby hands. I could never give up a child. Would I be any different from Blake's mom if the situation was reversed? Perhaps we can find a better way. Farm them out far away, where the mother can never meet them."

"According to your laws," Monrol said, "Blake, who killed so many, should be dead, what do we do with him?"

Zella should know what to say. She had never been much of a spiritual leader, only going through the motions. There had been no need. "I'll ask Marin."

"Marin went with Jorn," Dover said. "We can't let the Goddess decide. I think she has given us the decision to make ourselves. We have two more days. Do we allow him to continue his reign of fear on the people, or do we protect our community? She is waiting to see if we have learned from our ancestors."

"They have seen enough evil and pain," Zella said. "We must free our people from it. Who among us can do so without becoming evil? Anyone who does so will feel they can crush any who oppose them the same way."

"Tanna left the decision to the Goddess," Dover said.

Zella didn't want to hear that. Could her daughter's mind be damaged now? She had changed so much. She didn't want to see Tanna become Blake, an enemy to the people. "Once, murderers such as Blake, were forced to roam, shunned with no home."

"He'll come back and attack. He'll find more roamers," Calen said.

She hadn't even realized he had walked up to the group.

Ambrena pulled her arm. "Feed him to Kafa."

Zella stared at the child.

"Kafa wouldn't eat him," Fran said. "Not sure we want Kafa to anyway, might make mean baby Kafa's."

Ambrena laughed.

"Who is Kafa?" Zella asked.

"Kafa is the Goddess of the lake. Fishermen in the lake north of here have to be careful of her," Fran said.

"I agree, I don't think we want any animal to eat his contaminated body. It should be burned." Zella glanced at the lodge Blake was in. She couldn't decide who, or how, he was to be killed.

She feared they were all following along with whichever person chose to take control, much as the Webbels had followed along with Blake. Almost too much trust in leaders, and not enough in themselves. She laughed. Giving up control to others was too easy. The Webbels had allowed Blake to take control, and never asked for help. That wouldn't happen here.

"Will all the Webbel villa members please come here now," Zella said loudly.

The women and children were noisy, and unable to sit still. Even a few young men had stayed.

"Ambrena, how long is the walk to the lake?"

"A little while, not long."

"Webbels, for your part in not contacting the other villas when Blake went out of control, you will suffer. First, you will go without water for the walk to the lake that Ambrena will lead us to."

They dropped their faces in shame, and toes scuffed in the dirt.

"You will carry Blake, your former leader. He will be placed on a pile of wood, and tied to where he cannot escape. Tonight, it will be burned."

With Dover's hand in one of hers, and Ambrena's in the other, she felt a strength she had forgotten.

"When the rest of your villa returns, you will choose a new leader. For now, Calen will lead you. You will work to prepare the bones for the bone burning as well as help the residents from Shells prepare to move."

"You have all suffered as well. This final act of suffering will be the last. You will repay your obligation to our collection of villas."

Zella turned from the assembled group. Now to bring Blake out, and find a way for these people to carry him. The Webbel villa would do as they had been told. The water of the lake would seem a blessing after the dust of the Grass Sea, the burning of Shells treasury, and the fear of death.

## Chapter 33

Tanna led the group out of Shells burnt clearing and waited for Jorn and the men to catch up.

One tall muscular man looked around, through the crowd of people.

She walked over to him. "Hi."

He stared at her.

A young woman walked up and said brokenly, "New here, not know words."

How to ease his fears? Shells and Mills did have many words she had never heard.

The woman chattered to him in a birdsong speech.

"From?" If he spoke, his nervousness might calm, and he would better be able to assist them in their search for Westpit.

The man swept his hand across the Grass Sea. He pointed northwest, and waved his hands.

He must be from many days away. His cloak was too warm and overdressed for summer. The tunic under the cloak wasn't woven cloth. It was white fur. Tanna wanted to reach out and touch the fur. That would embarrass the man, at least it would if he had been from known villas. And it would be a signal of interest from her, since she was now the age to try to create a baby. Not today, and not with this man.

She smiled, and waved him on, as Jorn and a few of the men from Shells walked by.

An animal horn hung on a sling by his side. She tapped his shoulder and pointed at it.

He smiled, grabbed it, and blew into it.

The sound deafened her.

Everyone turned to stare at him. The man blushed, and placed the horn back at his side. He tapped his chest. "Adrian."

Tanna hurried to where everyone expected her, the front of the crowd. She was used to being in front, and preferred to be in front where the people could see her, not far ahead like her mom, because if something happened, no one would know. Or worse, if the group had to rest, they had to send a runner to find her.



Walking with the leaders, she would know what was going on in the group behind her. It would be a long day of walking. To walk further back in the group would be different, something she had never done. Did they feel protected? Perhaps other people wished to be in front, leading the group. Or, were they happy following the leaders and enjoying conversations?

She decided to find out. Tanna slowed down and listened to conversations as people passed her.

A child had followed and struggled to keep up with her Almond mother. The child's mother was pregnant, and carried a heavy load.

She grasped the child's hand and listened in to the chatter as the mother smiled at her.

More conversations from behind them grabbed Tanna's attention.

"My looms would be full by now. My cloth isn't being made."

"If your cloth isn't made, I can't design new tunics, and my daughter has a coming of age next Spring Trade."

One gen three woman laughed. "Enjoy the walk both of you. You, Jesna, are seeing plenty of new patterns to weave into your cloth. And Prina, all the various patterns and new designs you are seeing will create new tunic plans for you. Relax and enjoy. You have all winter to design. It's going to be a long one."

"Well, most of what I am seeing is rags. Though I could imagine what they should look like," Jesna said.

Prina nodded.

The older woman smiled and turned to join another conversation.

Tanna let go of the child's hand and let a few more people pass her. The child glanced up at her, and then raced to catch up with her mother.

A group from Almond came next, telling tales, and talking about how to build drums and flutes. One young man from Almond had a thoughtful look on his face.

"What are you thinking?" Tanna asked.

The man glanced at her. "I want to see the man's horn. What is from? How was it made? Could I do that?"

Tanna smiled. "I'll introduce you tonight at camp. Careful of prairie dog holes."

He wondered off, hemmed in by the rest of the Almond villa. No wonder this group was never first or last in line. Everyone appreciated Almond's gifts. No one wanted to lose so valuable a community member who could be so lost in thought they forgot to see what was in front of their faces. Life would be dull without them.

The Shims group had their baskets out, and collected plants along the way. Medicine was something she wanted to know more about.

They would appreciate being able to travel further and see more. They were seeing plants they didn't know, and asking each other what they were. Well, she could make their dream come true, for at least a few anyway.

A nagging thought interrupted her conscious. Where were the rest of the horses Blake had tamed?

Robin had stayed at camp with the horses to check on something before following the group. Where was Sandy?

Behind the Shims group were a few members of her villa. Several talked to the members of Shells who had come with them. She knew they were trying to learn their tales, and family ties to better fit them into the community. As the last people filed by, she glanced back.

Robin rode up with Sandy in tow.

"Sorry, my horse didn't want to come. I decided to grab a few pieces of the burnt building for firewood."

They rode all day, circling the walkers to be sure no one drifted off and was lost in the Grass Sea.

As evening approached, something peeked out over the tops of the Grass Sea. She signaled to Jorn.

Jorn waited with the group while she and Robin rode on ahead. They led the horses, who sniffed and tried to rear.

"Should we take them back to Jorn?" Robin whispered.

"We may need them," Tanna said.

They tied the horses to a gnarled stump.

Grass thinned ahead. They dropped to the ground and crawled a short distance.

Sharp jagged walls scattered across the landscape. Large pieces of gray rock were strewn across the ground. One piece

rested flat on the ground, holding a fire pit. Several men and one woman on horseback with spears rode around the perimeter.

Rubble littered the open plain.

Talking and laughter almost too far away to distinguish echoed through the dusk.

Tanna and Robin hurried back to Jorn.

The horses waited.

Jorn had moved the group back. It would be a long cold night with no fire for warmth.

People munched travel cakes. They waited quietly, resting uneasily. Morning would bring a plan, another battle.

Tanna walked through the camp, helping Jorn choose who would watch for the roamers, and for how long. She peered up at the cloudless sky. Stars gave light, to both them, and the roamers in the clearing.

## Chapter 34

The Grass Sea quickly thinned in the direction Ambrena led Zella and Dover. If the lake the people of Shells spoke of was large enough, all the villas could fish here, and wouldn't have the long the trek to Footprint Lake for summer fishing. Perhaps the fish that swam here were different. The ancestors had kept this lake a secret for some reason. This lake could save their lives this summer at least.

Scrubby trees gave way to a sandy beach.

Members of Blake's Webbel villa carted their barely conscious passenger. He did not struggle in the simmering waves of heat.

Large and wide, the lake stretched in front of her. She couldn't see the other side. Calm, dark, and tiny waves rippled across the surface. The moist odor of worms, and rotting leaves drifted in the breeze. A peaceful place.

The group placed Blake's barely breathing body on the ground, and walked forward to the lake. They reached down with their hands to bring water up to their mouths.

Zella scanned the horizon. This treasure had remained hidden. Fish and the nearby woods should share plenty of food. Nutria, could be brought and raised here, as almost pets, like the sheep and cows. It should be prime habitat for them. Nutria stew with well-cooked fresh vegetables was what she needed.

Dover reached for her hand as the people stepped up and marveled at the lake. Large amounts of water always gave the people a special yearning. Once, their ancestors had sailed across water, though no one now knew how. The only reason why had to be adventure, or fighting. Leaving behind everything you knew wasn't something she wanted to do.

"This place should be home to someone. Shells have lived near here for a while. I wish we could stay here."

"Where are the people from Shells?" Dover asked.

They stood back from the water, glancing away, towards the brushy trees.

Zella wasn't sure if they were being respectful, and giving the newcomers a chance to see for themselves, or if something was wrong. She walked toward them.

"We haven't angered the Kafa Goddess, have we?"

One gen four man, who seemed to be leading them, said, "We hope not. We don't know. We rarely go too close to the water."

"You don't fish here?" Zella's heart fluttered. Maybe the beauty was deceptive, and the dark water was more accurate. Of course, the heat of the day can make the water appear dark as well.

"Stay quiet, it's okay. The hungry Goddess grabs people. Over woods," he pointed to several trees. "She pulled a small child out of a tree."

That would not be a good way to die. Surely, this Goddess had her reasons.

One woman spoke up. "The boy was what you would call a rattler. While his mother grieved his death, I think she was relieved. She didn't want him to be like Orid or Blake. Trapper saw the child swallowed whole."

A sad relief for the mother. "What does the Goddess look like?"

Trapper leaned back, and looked at the sky. "Stays on the bottom of the lake, usually. When hungry, she searches among the shallows. A giant fish, similar to what some people eat. As long as a man and a child, she is. Goddess Kafa gulps her meal whole, and doesn't chew."

Zella shivered as if a chill wind blew. This place wasn't as peaceful as she had hoped. A water Goddess for a neighbor might not be good.

"Everyone, away from the lake," Dover said.

If only she could live here, in peace, away from the others, she would be safe enough. The Goddess would know when she could no longer care for herself. She wouldn't suffer long.

The group crowded around her and Dover, waiting to hear what they would say now.

Leading from a distance was easy. Leading from on top of the crowd was scary, and made breathing more difficult. Jorn could lead that way. So could Tanna. She opened her mouth.

A scream pierced the air.

Everyone turned to locate the sound.

Blake lay on the ground next to several downed trees, bound hand and foot, jerking as much as a bound man could.

Zella and Dover rushed over to him and stopped a few body lengths away.

His face wasn't red from screaming. It, and the rest of him, was covered with fiery ants. Tiny jaws gnawed him, forcing red welts up faster than she had ever seen before on anyone. He couldn't escape.

She glanced at Dover. Zella couldn't leave him like that.

They grabbed his hands and feet, and dragged his body, ants, and all, to the lake's edge. With all their strength, they picked him up, and threw him into the water.

They wiped the ants off their arms and legs and into the lake.

Blake's body, and the ants clinging to it, bobbed face down in the gloomy water.

He wouldn't have survived long anyway. The ant bite venom alone would have killed him. He may have deserved to die that way. Surely, the pain was no less than the pain many of his victims had suffered.

His screams burned into their memories, even as his body floated deeper into the lake.

Zella walked back from the water's edge. If it was over, peace would return to the community. She glanced back up at the people gathered around.

They were silent, watching her. Everyone knew what fiery ants looked like.

She walked to where his body had been.

The Webbel villa representatives had placed him down in a hurry. There was no easy to spot mound, though that might have disappeared, as they dragged his body off. Even in this sandy soil, loose dirt would be visible.

A few ants scurried about on the empty ground.

Zella gazed up at the crowd, and back at the lake.

As she did, a long glimmering glistening body emerged.

Blake's body bobbed on the surface, face down, visible red welts blistering in the sunshine.

The fish opened a cavernous mouth, and Blake's body, welts and all, disappeared inside. The Goddess Kafa had spoken. The ants had worked to bring a meal to her. She could be dangerous,

engulfing anything she wanted, while also a judge beyond the people themselves.

People around her relaxed.

Trapper walked up to her. "He brought us to Klapit. Glad he is gone. We'd like to stay here. Nuts in the trees in the fall. A garden his scouts never found near here. Don't make us move again."

"Your homes, though. They are full of bad memories. Evil spirits will haunt you if you stay there. Don't you wish to go back to your old homes, or on with us?" Dover said.

"A few. Old home, only fish for food, few other animals came there. Little grew there. Too warm in summer. Here, have variety." Trapper looked from Dover to Zella and back again. "Don't make us leave. Only home our children know."

The man and the rest of the rag tag group needed recovery, good food, and new tunics and shawls.

"How about you all come with us this fall, and winter in our villages?" Zella tried again.

They groaned.

She held up her hand.

"You all need good meals, new clothes, and safe sleep. There is safety in numbers. Your children need a chance to play with other children. I promise next spring, we will come back. Early if needed. Re-build your homes, in a different place. Maybe near where your gardens are, or nearer the lake."

Several of the survivors shook their heads.

"I promise we will do this. You all can learn the skills you don't have. We will all learn from you as well. This would be the perfect place for Spring and Fall Trades, and fishing, all in one place."

"Talk later." Trapper and the rest of the Shells people walked back down the trail to the burned village.

Dover squeezed her hand.

She glanced at him.

He smiled.

A new villa. A place to live together, instead of separate.

Maybe Goddess Amber would allow them to stay in one place now, if they wished. Maybe they had paid for their ancestor's crimes.

## Chapter 35

Tanna felt as if she hadn't slept all night.

She wasn't the only one.

They had awakened in the pre-dawn. There weren't enough people to fully surround the walls. Thankfully, there weren't enough roamer scouts to surround them either.

The plan was simple. As the scouts ate, the community would sneak up behind them, and tie them up. No one wanted to kill anyone. They would, if they had to.

The scouts in front of her watched the walls, not realizing danger waited behind them.

A wave of people on both sides crept forward. Only a few would rush forward to begin the attack.

Adrian blew his horn long and loud.

The scouts around the fire jumped and searched for the source of the bouncing echoes.

Tanna rushed forward.

Robin ran by her side.

They grabbed the two men in front of them. The men did not have time to react. Quickly, they tied their arms and legs. They shoved a piece of cloth in their mouths.

A few of the scouts had seen their attackers, and tried to escape. Their horses reared and snorted in fear, sending the scouts back toward the walls.

These scouts didn't need to suffer more than necessary until their full crimes had been determined. After all, these men weren't Orid, and no one knew what had convinced them to carry out his plans. She held her spear up over the two she and Robin had captured.

The men cowered.

She rolled the men over to be sure no prairie dog tunnels or fiery anthills were under them.

Threats and screams bounced off the broken walls.

Tanna hurried to where one man had managed to kick his way to freedom.

Her spear hurtled through the air, right through the man's colorful tunic as he tried to escape.



Robin caught up and passed her. He tackled the man, and shoved him to the ground.

Tanna grabbed the rope dangling from one leg.

The man tried to kick her.

She pulled the rope tight.

He slid backwards across a prairie dog hole. He kicked again.

She wrapped his feet tightly with the rope.

Robin jerked the man's arms behind his back and tied them.

The man jerked and tried to kick as he lay on the ground. Red blood from the spear wound smeared the bright colors of his tunic.

Those she had led gathered around her.

They left the scouts bound and tied on the ground.

Seven horses neighed and reared nearby. Some of the Webbel helpers ran forward to grab them by their lead ropes.

There might be more scouts watching. They might come to the rescue of these ten. Of course, that was expected.

Jorn, and the majority of the people with them, remained hidden in the Grass Sea. They would watch for more scouts.

Tanna motioned to have all the scouts brought to one spot. She would leave two or three people to guard them.

The bound men cursed and kicked trying to escape.

The last one brought over she recognized as Cealya, a woman from Webbel.

Tanna walked over to the woman and jabbed her with her toe. "Why?"

Cealya groaned.

"Robin, untie her feet. Help her up, and over there, away from the fire. Everyone else, stay here."

Robin glanced at Tanna. He turned to the woman and loosened her leg ties.

The woman could walk now, though Tanna could quickly pull the ankle ropes tight again with one hand.

Robin lifted Cealya slowly up, throwing another tie around her waist.

The woman walked forward with her head down.

Once out of hearing range of the scouts, Tanna turned to her.

Cealya motioned to the ground with her tied hands.

"You may sit on that rock," Tanna said.

Cealya sat down. "I can show you the way in."

Tanna sat in front of her, with Robin at her side. "Tell me."

The woman had tears in her eyes. They trickled down her cheek. Tied hands made it difficult to wipe them. "They took the man I wanted to be with. I had to keep an eye on him."

"What happened to him?"

"He died in there. A rock fell on him after the last heavy rain."

Cealya sat up as straight as she could. "I couldn't let my emotion show. At least I knew. I was allowed to feed them. Anxious families passed messages in and out through me. I couldn't leave. Too many women in there."

"How do we rescue them?"

"A few men worked on a secret way. A few escaped. Those who could. We can't let the numbers go down too quickly. It would be noticed by the dig leaders who stay in there. If only a few leave at once, they think they died." Cealya shuffled her feet.

"Only a few have left so far, the strongest. The others wouldn't be able to travel."

So, it wasn't over. There would be a fight inside as well.

"My brother too."

"Your brother?"

"A dig leader. I didn't want him too. He thought he could help from inside."

Robin's hand landed on her shoulder. He mouthed over Cealya's head, "Like Rusty."

A ruse was a good idea. Tanna tilted her head.

With his spear, he gently prodded Cealya up. After all, the dig leaders inside had heard the horn, and the scout's screams, and curses.

Cealya stumbled along the wall.

Tanna wondered if Cealya thought she was being led to her death. Of course, she could be leading them to an ambush.

She discreetly signaled Jorn to send reinforcements. They would creep through the edge of the Grass Sea, ready should they be needed. If, Jorn could be counted on. So far, he had been.

Cealya pointed to a high place in the jumbled mess. The highest point in the wall Tanna had seen. Tumbled rocks were tossed together as if a giant had played with pebbles.

Tanna followed her up to the wall.

Robin aimed his spear at Cealya's back.

This place had several smaller rocks, tumbled in front of the big ones. Tanna pointed at a rock, only waist high.

"Yes," Cealya whispered.

Tanna rolled the rock over. It wasn't as heavy as it appeared. Ragged children tumbled out. They hurried into the Grass Sea. Several frayed women followed, hiding their faces.

Behind them, staggered a few skeletal men. As one man passed, he whispered, "More. Hurry and save them."

Tanna gave the signal Jorn had told her to use.

"I'll keep her hands tied." Robin waved his spear toward Cealya.

"She's not all bad." The last man staggered after the others.

Seven people from Shims, and ten from Almond villa, crawled into the opening with their spears.

Tanna followed behind, spear at the ready.

Robin stayed behind to guard the tunnel.

At first, it was simply a tunnel lighted by tiny grease lamps. Barely enough light to make out the people in front of her.

An unrecognizable strong odor struck her nostrils.

The grey area lightened between the crawling legs of the man in front of her. Every movement forward, the stench worsened and became a multitude of mingled odors. Her stomach turned at the odor of body wastes layered in one corner. Flies buzzed and zipped over the rescuer's heads.

Rats scattered as they entered a tiny dark room, and were finally able to stand. Corpses were piled high along one wall. The unburied dead of the people held here against their will. Some of the dead were mostly bones, while flesh clung to other bodies. Rags were strewn around and piled in crevices.

They walked carefully and silently into the next room. It wasn't much better. Scraps of what had been blankets were strewn across the floor. Near the sunlit exit, were piles of bones, from what might have been rats and mice, the people had eaten. A few stones gathered in a corner.

One young woman's body lay on the ground.

The people who came in ahead of Tanna gathered around the body.

Tanna placed her hand on the woman's chest. Still breathing, barely. Blood seeped through the rags, and dried as she pulled her hand away. No sense of life stirred from the broken, bruised, and bloody girl. She lay there, awaiting death's beckoning tap on the shoulder.

Sunlight filtered in from the nearby entry, and caressed the battered body of the unknown young woman.

Anything, or anyone, could wait outside.

The rescuers beside her, and the captives outside waited on her.

Tanna crept to the entryway.

No plants, grass, or trees grew. They could not sneak into that desolate landscape. All the rocks had been piled up to form walls, and this pitiful dying space.

Five large pits lined the ground, with piles of loose dirt covering any vegetation that might have grown.

Blake had been searching for something.

One wall had a stack of gleaming objects, perhaps pieces of metal for the people to use, leaned up against it. Another had plastic artifacts, some whole, and some broken pieces. There was a pile of what appeared to be decayed wood. The place was in obvious disarray. What could they have found, or thought they found here?

What she didn't see, was people. The rest of the scavengers, or the dig leaders, were not in sight. The pits had to be deep to hide them.

She stepped back into the room and near the dying woman. No hope for her to live, even if Dover had been there. Her soul needed to know others would survive.

A slight sound, not even a groan escaped her lips as the men peered at her.

Sorrow lined their faces. They all wanted to reach out to the girl. They knew she would not want to be touched. Her mother may have been one of those who had already escaped. She may already be dead. Or, perhaps she was in the pits, waiting even now to escape.

"Go in groups of three, one ahead, and two behind. We have to rescue them. The dig leaders may not look much better than the captives," Tanna whispered.

The group separated themselves.

She glanced down at the young woman.

The woman's lips moved, not a smile, only an acceptance.

A reassuring touch, much like a butterfly's wing, and Tanna turned away. Her hands clenched. This young woman's death would be punished. Goddess Amber gave them three days. When had she been injured? And who had hurt her?

She walked to the entryway, and two men followed behind her.

People stepped carefully into the sunshine. Even the noise of a bouncing pebble would echo between the walls. They fanned out around the broken stones.

Tanna waved them forward. Although she led, each group, and each individual, was on their own. The choices she had made affected only the beginning of the battle for Westpit. Something that belonged only in the ancestor's tales.

She had to fully trust each person to do their share, and not hurt or kill needlessly. Tales of the ancestors flitted through her memory at top speed. A victory would never be hers alone. It would be a victory of them all. A leader never led without followers.

It wasn't so scary after all. She led herself, and others chose to follow. So why had people chosen to follow Blake and Orid? She couldn't think of that now.

An enormous pit loomed at her feet. To her left were roughly hewn steps of dirt, through the ancestral artifacts of generations past. Deep and smooth walls plunged nearly two people deep.

Three women huddled on the ground against the wall directly under her, watching in the opposite direction.

They appeared to be starved. Not the people who had hurt the young woman. These women had gourds, and small objects beside them. Sure enough, there was something covered up down there, or was it someone?

She held her hand up to the two men behind her.

With a motion of her hand, the men stepped back. Her foot touched the first step. She stepped down carefully.

The silent women gestured to her to go away.

The covered area in the pit moved. Slowly and rhythmically. A low growl and squeak seeped out.

Tanna crept closer.

She reached for the cover, unsure of what she would see.

The women against the wall shielded their eyes.

"Let that light in. Pull me out of here!"

The women cowered against the wall.

"Hoped." One woman dropped a gourd with odds and ends in it.

"They are bad. Made them go down this morning. Heard screams outside after we covered them." She held a metal piece in her hand.

"Don't hurt us," the third woman said.

Part of the pit floor was littered with debris. If these were the captives, let the dig leaders suffer. She would see them soon enough.

She held her spear out and pointed it toward the women, motioning them to the steps.

They stumbled up the steps into the arms of the two waiting men.

The ragged people came out of the pits and moved to the walls, near the cave. Waiting rescuers would guard them.

Tanna waved, and went back down. Now, to find out who the person in the hole was. She pulled the cover off once again.

"There is nothing wrong with the machine!" The person, probably a male, breathed nosily. "Send the rope down!"

It was a wooden construction, similar to the system used for water in winter. A board with a rope across it led down with a large gourd on the rope. She couldn't figure out how to work it at first. When she did, the gourd plummeted.

It thunked.

"Hey what'd ya do that for!"

She waited.

"Now pull me up, and hurry you three!"

This man was way too bossy.

What would he do when he saw her? She had to pull him up to find out. Tanna pulled on the rope.

The top of the man's head appeared in the half-light of the hole. He looked down.

The rope stopped. He looked up. "Who are you?"

Tanna smiled. He sounded scared. Good. She didn't normally want to scare people. This person deserved to feel scared.

Footsteps shuffled behind her.

One of the Tuttle villa men descended the steps to help.

She handed him the rope.

The dig leader slid back down.

Beside her, the man from Tuttle pulled the rope, and the dig leader reached the top. A pale face showed above quivering arms. With help, he stepped carefully out of the gourd.

Tanna quickly tied his arms behind his back. "Now walk!" He glared at her and cursed under his breath.

She poked him with her spear.

He walked up the steps.

All of the people who had been sorting stuff in the pits huddled against one wall. Seven people from Shims were with them, checking for injuries.

Now Tanna had to decide what to do with these people.

It should be Jorn's place as leader. He was outside, and couldn't abandon his place out there.

She didn't want to follow the dig leaders down that tunnel, or fight them in the tunnel either. Her decision could be the final decision for these men. Tanna motioned the man to join the other dig leaders guarded by the men from Tuttle.

## Chapter 36

Lake ripples smoothed. The dark spot moved across the water.

Zella turned away. Like her daughter, she had allowed the Goddess to decide. Her own place in Shells, and the place of this new Goddess, remained to be recognized. Perhaps she rarely heard Goddess Amber speak, because she was listening for Goddess Kafa and didn't know her. The surviving remnants of Shells would teach her about the Kafa Goddess.

The group from Shells led the way back to their partially burnt village. Few spoken words could be heard. No breeze rustled the new leaves. Even the children were quiet, and held an adult's hand.

Zella and Dover followed behind, so no stragglers would be lost.

Ambrena trudged in front of them. Her energy no longer vibrated through her limbs.

The burned-out center remained. A smoldering memory of the pain and loss. Several people stiffened as the Grass Sea opened to the cleaning.

Dover was right. This was no place to live. Not now, not ever with their memories. Someday, the Goddess may deem it safe again.

The two young women who guarded the box of burning bones for the figurines waited on them. Clay making was a grueling process using normal burning materials. Burning bones had to drain them emotionally, as well as physically.

"Do you want to see the garden?" Ambrena asked.

"How did you manage to keep the garden a secret?"

The gardener grinned. "Easy. Someone had to be too old to work in the pits, and to look after the children. Blake didn't want his scouts near the children, or me. I kept them safe, and learning. Follow me."

They walked single file down what appeared to be a dog trail.

The gardener waved at the Grass Sea. "Apparently he had no idea. We found this little clearing, and we planted."

"Blake didn't question. Weren't allowed to hunt our own food. Little grew where we came from. He thought we only fished," Trapper said.



"I grew up in Mills. I knew much the people from Shells didn't know. Here is my handiwork." The gardener parted the grasses.

Circles and circles of vegetables crowded the clearing, reaching for the sun's life giving rays.

Plenty of food for all of the people of Shells, and some to share if need be. Perhaps, Blake knew and intended to steal it later, after all the hard work was completed. They would never know.

She walked through the small circular patches. Early corn grew in one circle. Beans crept up their stalks. Squash plants peeked through the dirt nearby. Several circles of green vegetables, many she couldn't name by first growth leaves.

Not far away were scrub trees. There must have been more water here once. A few scrubby tree skirts were littered with pecans and walnuts.

This would be a wonderful place to live, if only they could set up homes this summer.

The gardener watched, and waited.

Zella walked up to the trees. Not far beyond, was a line in the ground. It was a smooth surface with grass and small plants, nothing tall grew nearby. She walked on.

Ambrena reached up for her hand.

"What lies beyond here?" Zella asked.

The child smiled, danced, and pulled her along. Once they crossed the more level place, she ran to a recently disturbed area.

Zella hurried to catch up. Surely, they didn't bury their dead here. Digging tools, some of metal, were near the disturbed area. Excited, she grabbed one, and gazed into the hole in the ground.

Right at the surface was a piece of plastic, which was being carefully excavated. Beside it, another piece of metal, and crumbled bits of paper.

"I found it!" Ambrena yelled. "We have tools now."

Zella smiled and hugged the child. "What have you found?"

"This." She pointed at the pieces in the tiny pit. "Over there, we hid other things. We don't know what they are."

An old book was under the cover, something she wished she could add to her collection. A few plastic artifact gourds peeked out underneath it. They were something anyone could use, once checked well for trace dangers. There was a good bit of small

plastic and several metal pieces that could be heated and reformed.

The gardener sat beside her. "What would you do with the paper?"

"I wish I could keep it, and compare it to the pieces I have carried since Dover, Calen, and I went north. Please, may I keep it until Tanna comes back?"

The woman smiled. "I can see you are a good person. It is safe to share our secrets with you. You may keep it until your villas come back, or we hear they won't be back."

The digging area could easily expand. A bison hide covered several parts of the ground with a living layer of grass, much like the pits the women had been hid in. The hide would fall apart. It worked though, if Blake or his roamer scouts came near, they would never notice. The gardener pulled several hide covers back. They had worked as much here as in the garden.

"We are close to Lake Kafa here. About half the distance we walked with Blake. We need to go." The gardener stood up and walked back to the brushy area.

Ambrena danced along behind her.

Zella followed her back to the burnt clearing.

Goddess Amber didn't allow them to build directly on these mounds of the ancients; perhaps they could build homes near the garden area. It wasn't far from the lake, not even a quarter of a march walk, and the group here could mine any season. Maybe some could be sent to where Tanna was now, to live when the groups became too big.

In fact, with all the extra people in the villas, they could plan a new settlement. Another one at the place in the north she had found with Calen and Dover. There might be enough adults by then. Surely, the Goddess would understand and not punish them for their villas being too large until they could make a change. The many orphan children deserved a chance to stay with the adults they knew until the recovery began.

"Do you see why we want to stay?" Trapper asked.

"We cannot move your homes this summer. The garden isn't ready now." She wanted them to be able to stay.

Trapper grinned. "With enough healthy adults, our lodgings move quickly. They are made to come apart and put together easy. Great for fishing."

Zella fingered the hide. Perhaps they could. A rush of memory, and eyes overwhelmed her. Where were the two men they had seen in the dig lodge? She hadn't seen them since their return. Only Calen knew where Blake hid them. The day was half over. The men might have been without food or water for two days.

"Calen, are there any more roamers?"

He didn't answer.

"Trapper, where would you like to have your homes rebuilt?" Dover asked.

"Maybe you can help us pick out a place." Trapper glanced from Zella to Dover and back again. "What's wrong?"

"I realized some of Blake's captives haven't been accounted for. We have to go find them. Only Calen would know where they might be. And he is in no condition to march quickly and be able to find them."

A woman younger than Tanna walked up. "I may know. Blake liked my company for some reason, no other woman. He never hurt me, though he yelled occasionally. I'm Yola."

No one knew if any roamers were around. Anything could happen. Dover needed to stay and help. The rest of the villas could help him when they returned. She motioned to Yola.

Dover kissed Zella's forehead. "I'll be here. We have a lot to do. I think in three, or four days, we can have the camp moved and settled. Maybe even a new food storage pit dug."

Yola returned with water gourds and some food.

Zella took one gourd of water and turned to hurry back in the direction of Klapit. She knew the general direction.

Yola knew it better. She led at almost double march speed, not slowing down for startled rabbits or slithering snakes.

Spear at the ready, Zella followed behind.

Webbel camp appeared on the horizon.

"Together, or separate," Zella whispered as they panted outside the circle, hidden in the grass. She took a sip of water and waited.

Yola looked at her wide-eyed. "Together is safer."

Six small straw and wood lodges nestled in the clearing. Straw was easy to find, wood less so.

The first lodge wasn't far away. Animals had dug in the dirt floor, leaving footprints behind. No food or clothing scraps were visible in the low light.

The second contained a few chickens hiding from the late afternoon sun.

Each empty lodge waited for the occupants return.

The sun floated down the horizon.

They had to find the men. The combination of day heat and night cold could kill.

"We have to check the Klapit dig lodge."

Roamers could trap them in there, and then they would be no better off than the men.

A thick line of the Grass Sea blocked the hidden Webbel villa from Klapit.

Klapit appeared abandoned. No one was visible. Hiding places abounded. They walked cautiously, and quickly, across to the dig lodge.

Zella motioned to Yola to stay. She listened at the entry. No sounds. The entry opened easily at her touch.

Yola waited at the edge of the lodge, watching all around.

Zella hefted her spear and walked into the dark interior.

The light from the open windsun lit the room enough to see the dirt covered hide, like the pit covers where the women were held. An eerie gloom settled over the odor of the dig lodge. An odor that didn't belong.

It didn't take much strength to pull the cover back.

When she lifted the entry in the ground, she had no idea what to expect.

## Chapter 37

Tanna faced the group of dig leaders. She had witnessed the starvation, the fear, and the pain of the captives, and the dying young woman. According to the Goddess Amber's laws, these dig leaders did not deserve to live.

The dig leaders didn't look much better, if any, than their captives. Hungry, Cealya had said.

Perhaps they had agreed to go along at first, not realizing Blake's intent. Maybe, like Calen they hoped to help the people, or prevent worse things from happening to them. Or, like Monrol and Cealya, some of these captives were their family and friends, and Blake must never know.

The Tuttle and Shims members who came in with her, some known, and some unknown, waited on her decision. People listened to her. The decision had to be fair and equally shared. This was not the place to sit and openly discuss what to do. There were too many roamers and dig leaders, and too many unknowns. Shells, and her mother, needed them to hurry and return.

Tanna did not want to be responsible for the lives and deaths of these people. If she decided wrong, the Goddess could send another attack of the Mad Gods, damaging their winter homes, or killing people here.

One of the dig leaders stepped forward. "There is another way out. The way we originally came it. They kept it blocked with rock."

Tanna grunted at him.

He pointed the way.

A crash on the other side of the nearest wall startled her. Dust floated in the air as the wall quivered.

Everyone around her backed away from the wall.

The wall wobbled.

The men grabbed the dig leaders and dashed across the ground between the pits to the other side.

One dig leader whispered, "Our cave is back here. Let's go in."

Tanna took the man in. Two Tuttle men followed behind.

Light filtered in through a hole in the ceiling. That would allow rain in as well. She followed him to the back, where there was an

opening in the side of the wall. Cealya peered in through the opening.

She smiled when she saw them. "No food Dale. Freedom."

"You told them where the entry used to be."

"I never thought they'd lock you in. They made you a captive too."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. They put up more stones, and then killed the men who placed them. I have no idea what they intended to do, or how they planned to bring out what they wanted, whenever it was found."

Pounding echoed, as people tried to push the stones apart.

The thought of starving in this hole sent shivers down her back. Whatever Blake wanted was so important he would kill for it. And kill those who helped him find it.

"How did you feed the people?"

"Through this little hole," Cealya said. "We could pass a handful each day. Only enough to feed a few people, not the thirty or so stuck here."

"What about the other exit?"

"That's why we made it. Once the people looked starved, I could sneak in more food. They were stronger. Soon, they might have been strong enough to escape. They were preparing."

Cealya glanced behind her. "I heard the scouts last night say something was wrong. The Goddess couldn't be happy, or she wouldn't let the Mad Gods loose. Blake should have been here yesterday. The scouts were worried. I passed the information on to my brother."

Tanna turned to him. "So the whole thing was staged?"

"Not really. Most of the other dig leaders wanted out, same as I did. Some of the men wouldn't give up having women at their beck and call. They were roamers. One or two aren't too dangerous." Dale shuffled his feet.

He shuddered. "Being the group leader, I decided to play along last night. I said I needed to choose one of the women for myself, and wanted the other men to wait in here."

Dale smiled. "I told the women my plan, quickly and quietly. I had no idea what the other dig leaders would do. They were desperate for one last night before they starved to death. They

didn't know. I didn't tell them the others were going to escape today. What they did to that young woman." Dale sobbed.

Tanna rested her hands on his shoulder.

He was speaking the truth.

The sound of the stone wall being pounded in the background faded, and became clearer again.

Desperate men had done great evil.

Maybe it was the separation of adults, male and female, which had led in part to the problem. Once, the Goddess Amber had declared that men and women should live apart, to heal from the wounds of generations past. The wounds were re-opening now because they lived apart, instead of together.

Tanna turned to the men behind her. "There has to be another way out. Blake blocked that entrance. He had no intention of using it again. He knew these desperate men would try to tear it down from the inside."

Sunlight streamed through the hole in the roof. "I'm going up there. Lift me up."

One of the Tuttle men sat his spear down.

Tanna climbed on his shoulders. These rock walls looked like a tumbled mess of pebbles to her. There had to be a way. She climbed through the hole, and stepped onto the upper surface.

Pounding continued behind her while she gazed over the rocks all around her. Drawing with her finger in the air, she guessed the way they would tumble, if knocked a certain way. A chill swept over her as she realized the answer. The dig leaders would have their cave tumbled down on them for Blake to enter.

Tanna carefully walked to the edge. She peeked down at Cealya.

"Cealya, go to the men who are trying to break in. Bring them around here. That tunnel is too small in the other cave to use."

She stepped back to the hole in the roof. "Dale, all of you, gather the people inside, and go to the opposite wall from the captive's cave. Be careful!"

Tanna watched them leave. She hoped she was right.

Before long, the pounding stopped. Jorn appeared around the wall, followed by several men with rocks as big as they could carry. She hoped she could convey what she knew about how to break

down these walls. Eventually, they must all come down. The Goddess could do it herself. Or, maybe she expected her people to stand up and do it without her help.

"Jorn, wait until I am safely down. Push this rock to the right," she pointed at one.

"And that one to the left." She pointed at the one beside it.

"They should fold down. The cave I am standing on will be gone. There must be more secrets hidden in this place."

"Varl, Sharel, Vira, and Nala weren't with the people. They don't remember the names."

"We will find them. If we have to question every roamer, we will find them." Tanna scurried back to the hole in the roof. The leap down wouldn't be easy. She eyed it carefully.

There was Robin, ready to catch her.

She dropped down gently into his arms.

He sat her carefully down, and dusted her hair out of her eyes. A quick kiss on her cheek, and he grabbed her hand, dragging her away to safety.

The paleness of his face told her he had seen the young woman, and there had been nothing he could do to save her.

They reached the waiting crowd. Dig leaders were backed up to the walls, hands tied. The rescuers had spears at the ready, watching them closely. Dale was in the middle of the group, sharing the same fate as the others.

Tanna turned to watch as Jorn did his best to follow her instructions. A childhood of building twig lodges and visions from dreams mattered now. Did she guess right? She had no idea how deep those stones might be buried. The stones looked like jagged teeth reaching for the sky. Hopefully, those two teeth were loose enough to be pulled from their earthen jaws.

After many hits, the stones began to sway. Dust swirled. The great slabs angled sideways and forward, into the large pit, pushing the roof balance towards the center pit.

The earth groaned as the rocks hit, and waves of sound and movement cascaded around the circle. One by one, the rocks shivered, crumbled, and fell, mostly onto the ones beside them.

Tanna urged the people to the center pit.



Pit holes and rocks littered the ground. Dust blossomed up into the air.

She couldn't see anyone, or anything. Choking and coughing, she reached for whatever she could find to hold onto and steady herself.

Screams echoed in the confused area. Locations, sounds, and sight weren't solid. They flowed around her body.

Dust settled slowly. Devastation was visible, up close, an arm's length, and at last, most of the clearing. Most of the giant stones were now on the ground.

In several places, arms or legs stuck out from under stones. The injured and dying groaned.

Even if the Goddess had been willing to give them another chance, none of the bound men stood.

All those who had entered for the rescue were standing or sitting. They had cuts and bruises. They would live to walk out of here. One groan grabbed her attention. It was close by.

She followed it and saw Dale's hand. She could see all of him, except his right foot. It was trapped under a large stone.

Robin rushed to him. Two men and Robin pushed and pulled to move the rock off Dale's foot. His lower leg was badly broken. Dale would heal, if Robin could mend it. He might never walk again.

Cealya dashed through the rubble; screaming for Dale.

"He's over here, Cealya," Tanna said.

Cealya passed her with a worried smile as she ran to her brother and hugged him.

This ordeal had been horrible on them both.

A few groaned on the blood-soaked ground. One waved to her.

"I want to die. I can't live with the memories of what I saw. I didn't do it. I really didn't."

Tanna took his hand.

The man's face turned from pale to pasty. Death had taken his spirit away. His hand turned cold in hers.

At first, she saw no visible wounds, no damage. Then, as she let go of his hand, she realized his other arm was broken. He could have healed from that, and led an active life.

Some wounds could never heal. Some scars couldn't be seen. Who knew what lay inside, within his mind. Giving up was often the

beginning of the end, even in a healthy person. Perhaps, he needed to let the damage go. He couldn't let it continue.

Tanna's tears fell on the dead man's hand. She didn't know his name, or where he was from. Perhaps his sacrifice would bring peace.

She glanced up.

Robin waited.

"He didn't have to die. He chose to," Tanna said.

Robin reached out to her. "The captive's cave, it is standing. The Goddess buried most of the dig leaders and roamers. We have to bury the others."

"Does the young woman live?"

"We will find out," Robin said.

Tanna and Robin worked their way across the desolation, through the broken rocks and the swirling dust clouds to the other cave. Entering it, they reached a gloomy space. A strand of sunlight peeked through the cloud of dust. Tanna followed it to the young woman.

Beside her was a weeping woman. "They promised they wouldn't hurt her. They promised," she sobbed.

Tanna touched her shoulder.

"I would never have come here to help, if I had known they would hurt her." Her eyes pleaded with Tanna.

Robin reached for the young woman's hand. "She suffers no more. She will come back. As a new child, perhaps, in a better place."

The woman cried, and then dried her eyes. "We must bury her, and not near those who hurt her."

"All of the remains of the dead must be buried. The roamers and dig leaders have taken responsibility for what they've done."

The woman held her hand to her mouth and looked away.

Robin picked up the young woman's body, as others struggled into the stinking chamber.

This ground was bad. What had happened here was so awful, that even if good, useful items had been found, they must never use them until the memory was washed away from the land beneath their feet.

The bodies and the bones of the dead were carried outside, across the tumbled rocks.

Tanna went to see where the roamers had been left. She couldn't find them at first.

A woman approached her.

"Did they escape?" Tanna asked.

The woman pointed.

One solid block had fallen backwards. The one the men had been working to loosen from this side. The roamers were buried. There was no saving them. She walked over to the stone. It had cracked, and not broken. Blood seeped out from the edges. A foot stuck out a body length away.

The Goddess had decided. Now, it was up to Tanna, and the community, to decide what to do with their lives. Who knew when, or if Goddess Amber would speak again. She had spoken more this spring than in any living memory.

Tanna almost hoped the Goddess would be silent for a while. If the Goddess only spoke when angry, she didn't want to hear her speak again. Hopefully, someday, she would speak kind words to Tanna and her villas.

## Chapter 38

Zella lifted the entry off the ground. After rescuing the women's pits, she knew what to listen for.

Heavy breathing escaped the pit.

"Are you down there?"

"Who?" It was little more than a whisper.

"It's Zella. Where is the ladder? Where did they hide it?"

"No idea."

The person shuffled closer to the entrance.

A rat scurried under the flapping windsun. Its movement brought out the thin twig lines of the ladder leaned against the wall, underneath the windsun. This one was more rickety than the ladders at the women's pits.

She hurried over to grab it. It was lightweight, almost too light, for even a child's weight. The ladder slipped down the hole, barely touching the top.

"Hurry. We don't know how long we have."

Zella wasn't sure if there were one or two men down there.

The first man climbed the ladder. He slid over the rim and onto the floor. He groaned, glanced at Zella, and then crawled towards the entry.

More shuffling sounded from the hole.

She wanted to wait here until the other man came up. "Who are you?" Zella reached out to the man crawling, while the other man wiggled the ladder.

He pointed at his mouth.

Of course. Blake may have abandoned them without water. How many days had it been? She reached for her water gourd, and handed it to him.

He smiled at her as he took it. After drinking a few sips, he relaxed and sat up right.

The other man had crawled to the top of the ladder. He appeared worse. Ragged, dirty, and bruised on his face. There was something familiar about the face. Something about the nose maybe.

He crawled across to the first man, who handed him the water gourd. After a few sips, he said, "Who?"

"I'm Zella. You are?"

The man turned his head.

Almost as if he didn't understand her words. Perhaps the heat, or lack of water, made it difficult for them to understand her.

"We have to hurry. There may be more roamers around. We have to help you back to the camp. How you both will make it, I have no idea."

The two men glanced at each other and crawled to the entry.

If the men were no longer able to walk, the trip back to Shells would take days, not two marches. And, they hadn't found Varl and Vira. Where could they be?

Dusk crept across the Grass Sea, lengthening shadows, to hide, them, and roamers as well. No one had asked Blake if there were any more roamers before his death. She should have, before they took him to the lake to be judged by Goddess Kafa. Her mistake could lead them to fear harmless roamers. Nothing she could do about it now.

The dig pits could be hiding people, or could be a good place to hide themselves. Zella dropped to the ground, and motioned to Yola to do the same. The group crawled to the tiny pits, not deep enough to hide them well. Growing shadows would have to hide them while they ate something for energy to march.

Zella reached the first pit, the one dug by Vira. She slid to the bottom and moved to the other side.

The two men slid down next, then Yola.

She handed out dried meat and fruit. It was a quick high energy food for long marches. There were no sweet foods for quick energy for the men. They munched the dried meat and fruit. They drained the two water gourds. Shadows grew long as the men recovered their strength.

The men watched her, as if they didn't trust her. She had to speak, had to move them somewhere safe, even if they couldn't reach Shells tonight.

"Where are you from?" Zella kept her voice low.

The dirtier man turned his head to one side, listened, turned his head. "Mills. Nacht travel."

Zella said, "Not travel? You can't stay here." Her arm waved at the open place with no safe shelter, food, or water.

He smiled and shook his head. "Nacht." He waved his arm up at the sky, formed a fist with his hand, and brought it down to his lap. "Nacht." He lifted his fist back up. "Tag."

Zella couldn't understand what he meant. She was sure he wasn't saying what she thought he was saying. Once, many languages had been spoken. Perhaps Mills had spoken a different language than she knew. That might be why they were not part of the same community.

Yola looked at the men. "Night."

The man nodded.

Zella wasn't sure how they would communicate, if simple words were different. Perhaps, they had common complex words. "We found where the women were hid. We rescued them. We are missing four people. Any idea where they may be?"

The man leaned toward her and listened.

"I'm Emory. Heard voices speak kinder name. Mills came together in ancestor's tales. Re-learn ancestor's ways, and words. Here a few seasons, can understand, though not speak the same way."

Zella concentrated. It wasn't only the words that were different. The vibrations were too. Something familiar, though not as familiar as she would like. She wanted to know him better. Something about this man was important. Her heart beat fast.

Emory put his arms on his chest and rocked them back and forth.

At first she was confused, was he cold? Then she said, "Baby?"

"Kinder," and held his hand up to about a toddler's height.

Mills, kinder. Someone else had mentioned Mills. "Rusty. Are you Rusty's sponsor?"

The man smiled. "She where?"

Zella wanted to rush this man off to find them. He would never make it, not in his condition. "Off to the east, in the villas, with her brother."

The man opened his eyes wide, and his hands dropped to the ground, "Bruder, she has one?"

Zella didn't know how long this man had been held captive, was the child his? Or was it a rattler. She shivered. She couldn't leave the child to die if it was a rattler. She had held him. He was past

that age now anyway. His mother was dead. No one need ever know. Rusty didn't know the customs and had never said. "Baby."

Emory nodded. "Go to them? See Linda again." A smile spread across his face.

She didn't want to disturb his peace by telling him of Rusty's mother's last days. A lie wouldn't do. If Rusty's mother were Linda, she had died. Right now, that was all he needed to know. She couldn't tell him how. He wouldn't understand. "Not now."

Emory's head and hands trembled. Large tears slid down his face.

There wasn't enough water to spend on tears. She held her finger up to her lips, and he settled down. He would hear Rusty's tale soon enough. "The children are away from here, safe."

He fought back the tears.

Zella looked to the other man and Yola. "Any ideas on where Vira and Varl could be hidden?"

"Village?" Emory said.

"We checked the Webbel villa, and they never made it to Shells."

"Once as trader. I found island. Check it?"

Yola was from Shells; did she know of this island?

"We crossed a tree lined meandering river to the west," Zella said.

"Island is well hid. Wasn't supposed to know about it. They tied me up. We go soon," Emory said.

The evening chill crept into the pit. Soon, the nightlife, lizards, and scorpions would be wandering through the arid lands searching for food.

They had to reach the river.

Zella dusted herself off. She was about to climb out of the pit, when she realized, the men might have a little trouble, since they were so weak. She let Yola go first to help pull them out.

Once they were all out, Emory led them cautiously.

It should only take a little while to reach the river. With the extra caution, and the men's weakness, it may take longer. Dover might worry tonight.

They reached the tree line and river north of Klapit. It must be near here that the Webbel camp had harvested trees for fires every

winter so none of the other villas would know they stayed here every season.

Emory didn't speak; only pointed.

The cold, rough, and rocky river crossing was ahead.

They slipped across the small river, careful to not trip and call out. They reached the other side, wetter than they wanted to be in the chill of the night. Emory led the way, past boulders, from where the river had once flowed.

Soon, they were in the scrub trees, some taller than others. A barricade of scrub brush blocked their path. Brush trees provided more cover.

A clearing, almost big enough for a villa was in front of them. Several horses grazed on the nearly bare ground in the moonlight. Unknown men sat around a fire pit talking. A brush covered area almost large enough for a lodge was nearby. It was too dark to see into it, to know if Vira and Varl were hiding in there.

Zella held her spear tighter. They had to surprise the scouts. She didn't want to kill them unless she had to.

A few of the horses moved in their general direction. The horses blocked the view of the men. They would have to go around. She beckoned to the men and Yola, and quietly turned to follow the pile of brush.

She was used to wandering silently through grass. So far, the sounds of their presence had not alerted the horses, or the men. Carefully they trod, small sticks snapping loudly in her ears.

They were closer now.

Sobbing sounded on the other side of the brush. The brush shelter must be to their right.

As they through the brush, voices of the men talking carried and drowned the sobbing.

Carefully, they moved forward to the brush pile. This had to be where people and the horses had to entered and left.

Zella was trying to figure out what to do when she heard a strange sound.

Thin high notes warbled out into the air. Something out of place in this overgrown location.

It sounded like Varl or Sharel playing a flute.



Zella could send an encouraging sound to match, and maybe they would hear it. She hoped the roamers around the fire didn't recognize it.

She hadn't practiced her bird calls since last summer. Three notes should do it, as the flute ended its song.

The sobbing quieted.

The men around the fire pit talked loudly now. They may not have even heard the flute.

"How could you let those two horses escape? They were the best we had. Young inexperienced riders! That's what Blake sent me."

"You were inexperienced yourself," a younger voice said.

"I learned! You didn't."

"It was my first trip out. I don't know how she jumped and knocked me off."

"Well, you won't have another horse until another is born, or captured. If I didn't need you to guard the captives, I'd kill you so you couldn't tell anyone."

Zella shivered at the words. The men and woman beside her moved closer for warmth, or safety.

The men's voices notched down as she peered at the blockade. There had to be a way in and out. Scrambling over the logs would make a lot of noise, which is probably how they guarded it. She reached to Emory and raised her spear up to ask him.

He pointed at one place. The brush was less dense there. They could go over it. She needed a distraction though.

"How are the captives?" One of the scouts said.

"I'll go check," the one who had been chastised said.

Her birdcall sounded low and long.

The flute played high and fast, much like in some of Marin's ceremonies. The roamers at the fire pit appeared to relax, as they focused on dishing out food for a late evening meal.

Notes from the flute sounded closer and faster, as the young scout approached the shelter.

She hoped she was reading the signal right. Zella motioned to Emory to go first.

His face paled as he crawled over the fence.

She followed. They stayed in the shadows and moved closer to the flute sounds coming from the shelter. Was it nine people against nine strong men, or eight not so strong, against ten?

The young scout reached the shelter and crawled through the entry.

Zella slid between the shelter and the barricade to listen.

"Who is it?" The young man's voice was vaguely familiar.

"Not sure," Varl said. "Are you with us?"

"He wants me dead."

"It wasn't your fault Dan. The Goddess chose," Varl said.

"I hope I live to know the Goddess you speak of. Do you have the sharpened sticks? How do we know when to go?"

"The bird will tell us."

Zella smiled. They had something. It wasn't much.

The flute faltered.

She edged around to the side of the shelter. The bird whistle sounded loud and clear. Maybe too clear.

## Chapter 39

The dead young woman's tear streaked mother carried her body to the fire pit Jorn had prepared.

Tanna wasn't sure what to say. The group had to decide where to bury the dead, or maybe cremate them.

Another woman pushed past the mother, shoving her to the side.

"You let it fall and kill them! My brother tried to help, like Cealya did. I know he did! How dare you come! We would have escaped!"

Cealya walked up to the woman. "Yes, you would have. Where would you have gone? You cannot cross the large river to go back to Shells. You are not strong enough to walk somewhere safe. You would die of thirst. We didn't have everything prepared."

"Then let me die here, with the brother you killed!" She glared at Tanna and crumpled to the ground.

Tanna shivered. Goddess Amber would hold her partially responsible for all those who had died.

The walls fell in unexpected directions. She thought the other rocks had been stacked up in such a way they wouldn't fall. Perhaps Jorn's men had loosened them, and they had fallen because of it. Had Blake known how they would fall? Would he have killed his own roamers as well as the dig leaders and dig team?

Robin had helped the woman carrying her daughter stand up. They carried the broken body to one side of the open space.

There were many bodies that must be treated with respect. Wild animals should not have the opportunity to devour bad spirits. Many of the dead were at least partially buried. Animals would eat the remains. However, they could die too, if rocks fell on them while they ate.

"My brother has to be buried with the good people who died," the screaming woman said.

"Hardly," another woman said. "Do you know what he did to me?"

"He never." The shouting woman gurgled. No more sound came out.

Robin ran forward. "Damage to the voice box. Let me help her away from here, down to the river."

The screaming woman was right. Many could find a friend or family member among the fallen. Here, at Shells, and even at Almond villa with Rusty and the grandmother. That same once good person might have killed, or maimed, another member of the survivors, or those who had died already.

The living gathered together outside the walls as the shadows lengthened. The dead would have to wait to be buried until morning. The wounded were placed to one side. Dead bodies and bones stacked in piles closer to the river.

All five villas helped. Cealya ran back and forth, showing some of the Webbel villa where to find water and fuel for fires to warm the wounded. Shims villa members watched and helped the nineteen people wounded in the fall of the walls. Surviving captives would need more medical attention later. Right now, they needed food, warmth, and water. There weren't enough blankets to go around.

Tuttle and Lava members who weren't hurt searched for food plants. Almond members chatted until everyone talked, and visited, so they could begin to heal, and feel less of the night cold.

The community had quickly pulled together in this crisis.

Jesna and Prina looked at the tall grass longingly as they wrapped some in bundles to help the fires warm quickly.

"Jesna, Prina."

They dropped the grass bunches in their hands.

"How quick can we cut some of this tall grass and loose weave mats? There aren't enough blankets. Will it help?" Tanna knew it would. Plus, it would keep everyone active, helping them stay warm as well.

Jesna smiled. "Sure, as soon as we have a few grass bundles twisted for the fires. Several people together can cut grass. And a few of the children can carry it to the fires."

"Good. Don't worry about nice or fancy. Teach everyone how to make the quick warm covers I've seen you do for hunters in winter snows."

Adrian watched the scene of devastation, staring at the broken slab covering the scout's bodies. "Not over," he said.

"Not all dead. One crying over there. Try save them?" He struggled to speak, pointing at the corner of the slab that had fallen on the roamers.

"You think so?" Tanna said.

"Yes." He turned to face her, tears in his eyes. "Son?"

If this man feared his son might be among the dead, she had to find out now.

The bodies would have to be moved. She had hoped to do it in the morning. Maybe the Goddess wanted her to save a few more people.

"Jorn," she yelled.

Before long he appeared. "What's wrong Tanna?"

Tanna waved at Adrian. "He heard sounds under here. We need to move this stone."

Nine roamers had been trapped under it. Three arms and two legs stuck out.

Moving it would not be easy. Even with all the people they had.

Robin had heard her. "Have Jesna make a quick rope. I have one length. I'll bring the horses. We won't need as many people that way." He hurried off.

"Listen for how many voices you hear," Tanna said.

A shout from inside the rubble drew her attention.

"One more alive. Bring Robin here!"

"He's gone for the horses," Tanna shouted. She ran to where the cry came from. Sharp, scattered rocks could cause her to fall. After scrambling through the rubble, Tanna reached the woman who had shouted.

This rock wasn't too heavy. A few people could lift it.

Jorn helped slide it over, away from the body.

It was mangled, almost beyond recognition as human. It was one of the men Dale had known as a dig leader. This man might have been one who harmed the young woman. If so, he didn't deserve to live.

She checked his pulse. It was weak.

Beside her, Jorn watched and waited, not saying a word.

Jorn was the eldest leader. Surely, he hadn't decided to allow her to take over this rescue entirely. He wasn't old enough to give up leadership. Unless he felt part of this whole situation was his

fault. Unless, the gen four grandmother was right. He must be the rattler that didn't know he was.

"Take him Jorn. Robin must see him. The young woman's mother must see him. She will know."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she hurried back to find Jesna.

Jesna was by the fire, showing the person closest to the cold winds how to quickly weave a grass blanket.

"Jesna, we need rope, and lots, quick. More injured have been found, under the slabs."

"Ask my mother over there." Jesna pointed towards the older woman who had named Jesna and Prina for Tanna. "She has a gatherboard full."

Tanna went to her.

Jesna's mom had plenty of rope.

If Tanna would listen to a tale, she would even help Robin and Tanna tie it onto the stone.

Tanna wanted to hurry. This woman knew far more about safely and securely tying ropes than she ever would, so she urged her to follow. She grabbed the woman's gatherboard and helped her up.

The woman prattled on, though only half of Tanna's mind listened.

They reached the slab as Robin did with the horses. He reached for the gatherboard as Tanna handed it to him.

"They found another and carried him to the wounded area. They want you to see him."

"Soon. After we finish here. This man may need me as much."

The old woman was on the ground, showing him where to brace the boulder with the rope.

Robin handed the rope end to Tanna and walked around to the other side. He slid it under the rock.

A scream rent the air.

Tanna grimaced. She almost dropped her end of the rope.

Robin glanced at Tanna. He wrapped the rope around the other side, and came back so the old woman could tie the knot strongly.

"Pull the other piece out. Can you tie the horses together?" The gen three woman tottered on her feet.

Tanna ran to tie the neck ropes together firmly.

The woman then tied the other long rope to her first knot. She pulled both pieces with her, and tied one to each horse, lending as much strength and stability as possible.

Jorn returned with a few strong men, including Adrian.

"Okay. You men push. And Tanna, lead the horses forward," Jesna's mother said.

Tanna glanced worriedly at the men. The stone was heavy.

"Wait," Robin said. "I'll stick some logs under this end closest to the horses, it may help."

Robin placed a few logs under the upper edge of the stone. He hurried to the back with the other men.

"Okay, everyone ready?" Jorn asked. "Tanna, urge the horses."

Silence except for the cackling fire.

Tanna patted Sandy's head and spoke gently to her.

"Okay, let's push!" Jorn said.

Tanna urged the horses forward. They all heard the scream as it faded out, under the slab.

The people behind her struggled over the rocky ground and broken bodies.

She pulled with the horses. Encouragement might not be enough.

The scream grew louder as the slab moved across the bodies.

"They're out!" Robin yelled. "At least enough."

"Looks like three alive, maybe," Jorn said.

Tanna took a deep breath. Several people were there to see to the dead and dying. She didn't want to see anymore dead or wounded bodies. The two horses nuzzled her as she untied them from the rock. Sweat glistened in the fire light. A drink at the river would be good for them all.

They deserved a rest after all their hard work the last several days. Though how horses relaxed, she didn't know. They nibbled on the fresh shoots close to the water's edge. She wanted to leave them here. They seemed content to stay nearby, and didn't like the smell of death any more than she did.

She filled her water gourd and walked back as the stars peeked out.

The horses followed behind her.

It would be a long night. The dead waited. A decision had to be made.

A wolf howled in the distance, soon followed by an echo across the river. The horses tossed their heads and snorted.

Lions and wolves would arrive soon, potentially wounding many more.

Tanna reached the area where the wounded rested. The screaming person was another man. Guilty or not, she would have to decide. They had no walls tonight to protect the people, only the fires.

"Robin, I think for our safety, protection, and the warmth of the wounded, we all need to move over to where the dead are, and cremate them."

It wasn't what anyone wanted to hear. No one wanted to spend the night next to a fire cremating the dead.

Robin carried the wood he had brought from Shells. A few other men went to the scrub brush by the river, led by women with torches to gather more. The fire would burn hot, and stink. No one wanted to smell it, or smell of it in the following days.

They had no other choice for their own safety.

Somehow, tomorrow, they had to move all of these people back safely to Shells. It was at least a full day's march with strong, healthy people. How they would make it now, she had no idea.

Bonfires flared around the dead, as the wolves howled closer. Even the complainers would rather be near the stink of burning flesh than be left outside, unprotected from potential attack.

Tanna held her head, resting, wondering what had happened to the not quite gen two girl she had been before she left Lava.

"They told us building a wall would keep us safe from wolves, and we listened." One of the captives wove a blanket.

"Where are the men?" Jorn asked the woman.

"Some are long gone. Blake ordered many to be killed, so they would never tell. A few are the skeleton men who came out first, when they opened the hole in the wall."

"So there are more out there, somewhere?" Tanna asked.

"Somewhere. Sponsors, sons, brothers. No one knows for sure."



Zella would want all these people to come back to their villas. If those who escaped came back with help to rescue their families, they would be no one there. There were no tools to make clay tablets. Even if there were, would rescuers from other villas be able to read them? Many missing roamers would. And that would be dangerous. Better to leave no record of where they were going. Even if it meant some families might never rejoin.

Robin sat beside her.

So much had happened in a few days. It felt as if she had been in the center of activity for most of her life. Surely, others here must feel the same. Maybe on the walk back, they could spread out and talk.

A lion's roar nearby brought the sweating and snorting horses up to Tanna and Robin.

Tanna patted their heads.

The bodies of the dead burned in front of her. No one would ever forget this night.

## Chapter 40

Zella's bird whistle pierced the air. Louder and stronger than she expected. She hefted her spear and rushed around the brush shelter into the open.

The scouts at the fire pit stood up. Mouths agape, as if they didn't know what had happened.

She rushed forward, straight for the one who had yelled at the younger scout. The scream that echoed from her lungs startled her. A loud, drawn out screech that seemed to reach back to the depths of the ancestor's tales.

The distance between her and the roamers at the fire pit tunneled out. It felt as if she had been running forever. And nothing changed.

The roamers at the fire pit had not moved.

Wind whipped her face. Noise rolled up behind her like waves.

A roamer was in front of her.

She reached back and slammed her spear into the face of the man.

He crumpled to the ground.

Her arm was jammed backwards by the sheer force of the blow.

She dropped her hands to her knees and panted from the run and the primal scream.

Blood oozed from the scout's skull.

Zella vomited onto it, not helping matters. She staggered backwards, right into something solid.

Turning, she saw the body of a horse, lying on the ground. The noise and sights became clear around her. The horse had a spear in its side and thrashed toward her.

Zella grabbed her spear.

It wouldn't loosen from the scout's skull.

She grabbed a burning branch and turned to see who was where.

Most of the fighting was over.

Nala and a young man beat one of the roamers over the head with a heavy branch.

Sharel ripped apart the tunic of one of the dying roamers.

Varl and Vira were side by side, beating two roamers into the ground. Two horses stood behind them. Others were missing.

Yola cut the tunic off the man she had killed with a rock. The quiet man was on the ground motionless.

Emory wasn't in sight.

The horse behind her stopped thrashing.

Zella crawled around it.

There was Emory. And the roamer he had attacked.

She dropped to the ground. "Emory? Are you alive?"

He groaned.

Firelight flickered eerily over the scene. Blood everywhere. Broken bones gleamed amidst the blood and mud. The battle tales of the ancestors were hardly horrible enough a warning.

She barely knew this man.

The massive blood loss was too great.

"Kinder," he said.

"I will care for them," Zella said.

Emory smiled. His body began to tighten. Intact muscles hardened, and lost their elasticity. Death had devastated his body. He didn't deserve to die.

A tear slipped down her cheek.

Varl carefully took her hand off the dead man's arm. "Please Zella, we need you."

She didn't want to turn away from him. Emory had needed her, to return to his children. He hadn't lived. He didn't know the truth about the children's mother. Goddess Amber would have to tell him.

Zella wiped her face and looked up at Varl.

"This other man is weak."

She walked to him. No visible damage. He had killed the roamer he had attacked.

A few cuts and bruises, no great blood loss. "Hot tea for him. Anyone else hurt?" She sniffled and wiped her nose again.

The others held up their arms. Blood glistened in trickling trails on arms and legs. Some cuts were nasty, though no massive bleeding. Nala helped the young scout over to Zella.

"Dan needs help."

"I think it's broken." He tried to hold the arm up at the elbow. About mid ways of the lower arm, it bent at an unexpected angle.

Zella grimaced. She didn't know enough medicine. For tonight, his pain could be relieved, maybe.

Dover could set his arm tomorrow, if they made it back.

"Boil fresh clean water."

Turning, she pointed to Varl. "This horse sacrificed itself. We need food. Can you cut as much as we can cook tonight?"

He walked to one of the dead men and pulled out a knife.

Vira went to help him. Horse wasn't their favorite meat. It would do. They were all hungry.

She had to try to save the one weak man with no name, and no words.

"We have to pull the dead away. All except Emory. Drag them as far from the brush shelter as we can."

Yola turned her head.

Zella didn't want to see it either.

They first moved the man Emory had killed. Blood left a glistening, narrowing trail as they dragged the body across the clearing. It was night, so they wouldn't see it once outside the firelight.

Horses shied away, between them and the brush shelter.

After the first body, they took a few deep breaths before going back. It was hot exhausting work, even with a cool breeze blowing. The brush prevented most of the breeze from reaching them. The last body they tried to move was the man Zella had hit. Her spear would not come out of his bloody head.

Vira had horse meat soup simmering now.

Varl sliced more meat off the dead horse.

"Varl, can you help?" Zella panted. If there were more than one more, she couldn't move another. Her sore arms ached as much as they had from pulling Calen's stretcher all day.

He walked over and pulled hard on her spear. It took all his effort to free it. He pointed Zella toward Vira, and told Yola to grab the other leg.

Yola took a deep breath as she reached for the dead man's leg.

Zella took her spear and walked back to the fire. Varl wouldn't hurt her, though Yola wouldn't know that. Yola had seen far too much pain and suffering.

Vira, Sharel, and Nala sliced the meat so thin, they should be able to carry it tomorrow. They laid it across a loose frame of poles next to the fire pit.

The horse meat would be a gift to Shells.

She walked over to Dan.

He stared into the fire, holding his arm gently in his lap.

"We can't leave the horses behind," he said.

"How can we take them?"

"I can. I could ride. I even let Nala ride one day. The day we lost the horses."

Nala smiled at them.

He can't be too bad if Nala liked him. Goddess Amber would understand if Zella waited until morning to determine his crime and obligation. Then, the rest of the council could decide, and not her.

"Well, let's see what we can do for that arm now."

He held it out closer to the firelight so she could see.

Discoloration, an odd angle.

Zella collected limbs, and braced it.

Dan had to keep it from moving too much.

"Is there any spare cloth around here?"

"On the dead men," he said.

That would never do.

Varl handed her a strip of horse's hide from the leg.

Zella set to work.

Nala held the sticks in place.

Wrapping the limbs around his arm with still bleeding horse hide was not easy, physically, or on Zella's stomach.

Dan grimaced.

There was only one quick cure for that kind of pain. She turned away long enough for Nala to reach out with a quick kiss on his cheek.

Turning back, she tried not to grin. Nala knew as much as she did about medicine.

Drying blood glistened in the fire light.

Willow bark in her gatherboard would make a strong tea for them all. It took a while for the tea to steep, and a few good gourds had been broken.

Dan sat silently beside Nala.

She touched his arm and he smiled. It was obvious, communication beyond words occurred between them.

Sharel arrived with all the dingy blankets from the shelter. They would sleep outside next to the fire tonight. For warmth, and to see any scavengers who came for the bodies.

Zella felt truly alone as she settled down to sleep. Tanna had been with her every night she could remember. Recently, Dover had been there to keep her warm. Now she snuggled alone by the fire. All the others were nearby, and lost in their own thoughts and dreams.

Wolves howled.

Horses stamped and neighed when one came too close. The scout's bodies would be reduced to bones by morning.

As for Emory, she wasn't sure what to do. They had placed his body near the fire. She didn't want it eaten. Cremation wasn't right.

Vira had suggested placing his body in the river.

Zella shivered at the memory of how Blake had been swallowed. She didn't want that for Emory. Somehow, it seemed wrong. Morning would bring answers.

Chirping birds startled her awake. She stretched.

Others were getting up slowly, moving carefully. Achy, and bruised from the fight.

Nala leaned over Dan, checking his arm. With such tender care, Zella didn't have to worry about him.

She helped Vira prepare a light meal.

"It shouldn't take us too long to reach Shells. Maybe half a day with the wounded."

Vira stirred the soup.

"Has anyone told you about them?"

"The roamers talked about them a lot. If you can call shouting and yelling talking."

Zella glanced at the corner of the clearing where the men's bodies had been left. Bits of tattered clothing and bones were all she could see. Not much left. Only flesh for the smallest of scavengers now.

She took her dish of warm horse soup and walked over to Nala and Dan.

"We can take their lead ropes. Everyone who is okay can lead one. They are used to being led as much as having a rider."

Nala hung onto his every word.

"With help, I can ride. I might bump less, or I might not. We can load meat on them. One horse can carry the other man who is so weak."

"Do you think they will carry their friend?" Zella asked.

"They won't like it. They will stay together."

"Let's eat and go," she said.

On the walk to Shells, they followed Dan's lead. He was always careful to defer to Zella. He told them how to open the gate so the horses could go through. They had one more horse than person who could lead them. Dan rode, and led it with Emory's body draped across, and tied down.

They had to wade through the first river soon after leaving the clearing. Not easy to do holding onto a horse.

"There should be two more river crossings," Dan said. "We can veer north and save two crossings of the same river."

Before they reached the second crossing, they saw water deep to the south.

"Is that a lake?" Zella glanced at it longingly.

"Yes, a small one. I've been there once. Scary snakes live near there. Rattlers, and others, that are more deadly," Dan said.

After the second crossing, they decided to rest.

The strain was visible on the young man's face. He needed some hot tea. They couldn't wait to make a fire for water to boil. Their clothes would dry in the warm sunshine before long. Dan had made sure Emory didn't fall off the horse, and had checked on the other silent man as well after each crossing.

So far, the meat hadn't been dunked in the rivers.

The horses splashed through the river, and then drank their fill.

She yearned to see her daughter again.

Dan rode beside Zella. "I think we need to veer left here."

Zella glanced up at him. "Perhaps. I think they will be to the north instead."

She waited to see his reaction.

"You've been here more recently than me." He fell back in line. He was right. Burned Shells that he knew, lay to the south. New

Shells villa lay to the north. No point in visiting the burned villa with fresh horse meat. Best to keep going.

Soon, they crossed the garden area. Someone, she wasn't sure who, was working in the garden. On they passed, holding onto the horses with the horse meat and the two men.

They reached the clearing where Dover was supposed to be helping the villa rebuild. The first people who saw them coming stopped what they were doing. Small children ran and hid behind adults, or any objects they could find.

Zella would have found it funny, if she didn't know the reason for their fear. These horses had been used to scare these people. Now, they carried one of their own, dead on their backs as food from the Goddess. The council would have to decide if the Goddess wanted them to keep the horses, or let them go once this day was done.

She strode forward, leading a horse. "Where is Dover?"

Relief flooded their faces. Good, they recognized her voice.

Dover walked around the corner of a pile of building material. "Good," he said. "With horses, we can move the whole villa out here. Thanks for bringing them Zella. We were thinking how much we wished Robin and Tanna had left us the two they found. They won't need them with all those people anyway."

Women ran forward to grab the bundles of partially roasted horse meat from the backs of the horses.

Dover walked over to the two men he didn't know, one slumped across the horse's back, alive, and barely breathing. He checked the man's wrist and signaled to another man to help with the living man.

The man from Shells carried off the man without words.

Emory's body had slipped down the side of the horse.

"I couldn't save him." She motioned, and another man from Shells led the horse with Emory's body behind the reconstructed lodges.

Dover glanced sharply at Dan. "See me later." He hurried to where the man without words rested in the shade.

Zella decided to join the group leading the horses to the old Shells camp. After all, she was rested enough to help with the hard work. The horses would make it lighter. They could always decide what to do with them later in the day.



# Chapter 41

They should have been back to Shells by now. The group who had gone to Westpit had camped two nights already. The first night, they camped near broken stones, a place that must have once meant something to the ancestors. It was now in the middle of the Grass Sea, with no water.

On day two, they crossed the large river. Sandy and Robin's horse had to carry the weakest survivors one by one across the river. Ropes kept the horses from Westpit with them as well. Jesna and Prina had kept watch over those horses. The whole group could go only as fast as the slowest person among them.

This day had moved slower than the previous day. If they didn't reach the camp soon, some of the men and women never would.

A lake was visible in the east. She had heard the whispers of the people from Shells about the lake, though she didn't quite catch their words. It was obvious they were afraid of it.

"Robin, go see if many are falling behind. I'm going ahead, to see how much farther it is."

Robin rode to the back of the group.

Tanna turned Sandy and was about to go forward when Adrian waved to her. "Yes?"

"Walk with?" Adrian asked.

Maybe the man could keep up. She nodded.

She urged Sandy onward.

Rounding the lake, they veered northeast and found the trail. The clearing for Shells was only a few horse lengths away.

Only, it was no longer there.

The burned building in the center was now dismantled. The fire pit, and the two Almond girls she had left behind waited. Tattered rags and bits of sticks from the lodges were scattered around the clearing.

Adrian was right behind her.

The two girls sat in the middle of the desolation.

Tanna rode over to them. "I'm sorry we were gone so long. I hope the rest of the group can make it here tonight. There are many hurt."

"The figures are complete. We kept them in the box. We had to let the fire go out, so they wouldn't over cook."

Tanna had been gone almost twice as long as they needed.

"Shells moved a short walk away. We can go find Zella."

"The group coming behind me won't make it any further tonight. We need all the healers."

"I'll go." One girl stood up.

The horn blared beside her.

She turned to Adrian.

Adrian dumped his gatherboard on the ground. He ran forward. The horn, swung loosely in his hand.

Tanna's gaze followed.

A thin man staggered out of the tall grass.

"Son!"

"We survived."

The big bear of a man grabbed the skeleton and whirled it around. "Child."

Tears flowed down his face as he walked back to Tanna. "Help."

The skeletal man tried to speak.

Another man walked through the grass. Not quite so thin, and not healthy either. He tried to smile as he walked forward, holding his spear horizontal in front of him.

Horse hooves pounded toward the clearing.

Robin rode up behind her.

More horse hooves pounded from another direction.

Tanna, and the men, grabbed their spears, facing the sound.

"Wait." One of the girls held up her arm.

The first horse flew through the grass from the north. A young man rode, with one hand. The other arm was tied to his chest.

Behind him came a grey horse, with Dover holding on, face as pale as could be.

Tanna tried not to laugh at the sight. She was unsure about the young man, now riding around her and Sandy.

"Tanna! You're back! Zella has been worried about you. She was going to send some of us out to look for you in the morning," Dover shouted. He slid off the horse. "There, that's better. The whole crowd will be here soon."

Robin and Tanna slid off their horses.

Dover hugged Robin, and then Tanna.

She turned to Adrian. "Dover, he needs help."

"What, him? He looks well enough," Dover said.

Then, the skeletal son of Adrian peeked around him.

"Oh. What happened? No, don't tell me know. Do you have any food?"

"Not much here." The Almond girl lowered her head.

"We don't have much either," Tanna said. "We were gone far longer than planned, and so many sick and wounded."

The young man rode back the way they had come.

"Food will be here soon. He can bring some of the horse meat," Dover said.

"It seems there are many tales to tell," Robin said.

"Yes, perhaps we should tell them by firelight after a good meal?" Dover waved the two men to an area he could examine them.

Tanna and Robin decided where to set up the sick area for those Dover would need to tend to. It wasn't long before the rest of the group trickled in. Those who had gone on the trek south were exhausted. Too weak, even the healthy ones, to help with preparations for the night. Over a hundred people almost too tired to eat.

Soon, Zella arrived. Tears streaked down her face as she hugged Tanna. "I was afraid you wouldn't come back."

Tanna smiled. "I enjoy travel. I'll always come back."

"Dover and I, we want to stay here."

The community had changed. Change would mean new ideas and new places, new relationships, and new dreams. It would bring new tales for the tale-tellers. A new way of life for everyone, whether for good or bad, life would never be the same.

Soon, more horses arrived, carrying food, and shelter. The traveling group would not have made it to where Shells had moved, tonight anyway.

Calen sat beside Dover and Zella, chatting away as the group ate.

Jorn was beside Tanna and Robin. Thinking back, she remembered something. Glancing around, no one was paying

attention, so she whispered to Jorn. "I know Mom isn't your real sister. I know who your real mom is. I'll never tell."

Jorn lowered his head, and put his hands in his lap. "Everyone I have hurt, I am sorry."

The group silently waited.

"I never knew what Blake was doing. If I had, I would have stopped him. I know longer feel I can lead this group, or the council. I will ask Tanna to help you all choose a new leader. I never sponsored a child that I know of."

"No, you can't quit leading now!" Several people said.

"Who will guide us home?"

"Tanna will," he said softly.

"Why? What did you do that was so bad?"

"Look around you," Jorn said. "We have no shelters tonight. We have no fish from summer fishing. There are no nutria stews, or nutria dried for winter food. We have no new tools, or artifacts, from digging. We have nothing."

Jorn covered his face with his hands as sobs broke out.

A muffled roar of voices sounded as people argued around him.

Tanna reached out to him. "It isn't too late!"

Her shouts brought everyone's words to a standstill. "We have a lake behind us, and bison in the Grass Sea. I don't know how many days we have. We will store some food for winter."

"We have sixteen horses to take the food home. We can always start a new herd. There's even a corral at Almond villa that we can fix up in a day. Horses can give us food and shelter."

Adrian's skeletal son waved. "I can help."

"Were you one of the men who worked on Westpit?" Tanna asked.

He nodded.

Jorn reached out to her. "I can take a few of our hunters, and horses. If we hurry, we can harvest some nutria and meet you all back at Almond. Zella can have her nutria stew."

Zella blushed and laughed.

"We need to have the ceremony in the morning, as the sun rises. Everyone please be here. At the fire, well before dawn." Tanna wanted to be by herself. Tonight she must finish preparing the ceremonies. She and Robin would have to wait for time alone.

The people wondered off to find a place to sleep. Some prepared themselves for the various journeys.

After most people settled in to rest, her mom sat beside her.

"Tanna, I buried a man. I killed a man too."

"I think we all did. The Goddess isn't angry. Try not to hurt." She hugged her mom.

Tears glistened on Zella's cheeks in the firelight. "Emory was Rusty's sponsor. He died, saving my life. I promised to care for her."

Tanna cried on her mom's shoulder. Rusty would be sad, and proud of her sponsor. She and her mom talked into the night.

Zella told her she had been digging in the pits near Shells new home. She had found many useful objects. She wanted to stay, and dig through the winter. No objects like the one Blake had found. If the council agreed, Klapit would be left alone to recover from what had happened there.

The first rays of light peeked across the horizon.

Tanna stood at the fire, over the box. It was warm now. Not hot like before, when baking the clay. Not cold, as it had become while awaiting her return. Each piece would be a reminder.

The people's faces were lit by the eerie firelight, waiting. No ceremony like this had been performed in living memory.

Allowing the anticipation to grow, she waited longer.

At last, as a new ray of sunshine peeked over the horizon, Varl and Sharel played a drum and flute. A sound remarkably like the dawn itself.

Tanna stepped forward. "Most of you were here for the death ceremony. Let not the deaths of those who died be forgotten."

She reached for the lid, and opened it with her bare hands.

The crowd gasped.

Tanna pulled out a few charred bones, those of the dead who had chosen to die here, and the roamers who would have killed them.

"As their bones and dust mingled, they bring forth a new life and a new community joined together."

She reached into the box and pulled out the bear figurine. "In recent memory, adults lived separately, and only visited when they wanted a child. Now, we can choose. We don't have to live apart, or

together, we can choose. We are all one people now, not separate villas."

The crowd murmured.

Some would be afraid once again.

The clay cube came out of the box next. "My villa, the Lava villa no longer exists. We are part of a larger group of people." She handed the figure to Zella.

Next was the clay pot. "This pot represented the Shims villa. As great healers, they rarely accepted a child not born to one of their members. Perhaps, we lost the skills of many this way."

Dover stepped forward to take the pot.

She pulled the clay flute out. "Almond has agreed to share their musical talents, so we all have music any season, not only at Spring and Fall Trades." She smiled at Varl as he took the flute.

Cheering and shouts sounded in the background.

The clay rope was next. Vira walked forward carefully, weak from her capture. "Vira has agreed that all who wish to learn; may learn to weave. She, and the rest of the former Tuttle villa, will share their secrets with you."

Many people clapped their hands. Fear and anticipation shown in the people's eyes. Though, they all wanted to learn new skills. No one wanted to share their special skills.

She pulled out the clay spear. "The former Webbel villa was harmed by their knowledge, as much as helped. All who wish to learn tool making shall. No one person, or group, can hold all the knowledge we need, to provide our homes, food, and protection."

Calen stepped forward and took the clay spear.

"As each person placed a clay mold, they will gather them after the ceremony."

Murmurs escalated around her. They had many more people now. There couldn't be enough to go around.

"A new beginning, a new people. A new name. We are the Pit Miners." The crowd clapped, cheered, and yelled.

Sounds descended to silence.

A shout resounded in the distance.

"Is Jorn here?"

Two people emerged from the east side of the Grass Sea.

At first, Tanna didn't recognize them.

Then, she realized it was Gel and Kleal. Days since she had seen them last, and she didn't recognize them. Her world had changed drastically since then.

"Gel, Kleal, it's good to see you. Is everything okay in Almond?" Jorn said.

Gel walked up to Jorn and glanced at Tanna standing before the quiet crowd. "Yes. Rusty felt she had to come. We have been looking for you for days." Jorn motioned to Tanna.

"Rusty. Is she okay?"

Rusty ran out of the grass carrying her baby brother. She ran into Tanna's arms. "Brother needs a name."

Uden stepped forward carrying Corandra.

Zella whispered to Tanna as she took the infant and held him up for everyone to see.

A perfect choice. A tale yet to be told around the fires. "The child's name is Henry."

Rusty looked up at her, tears on her cheeks. She grabbed Tanna's legs and sobbed loudly. Drying her eyes, she turned to the group. "Thank you."

Uden stood in the background, her outfit blowing in the breeze. She had come to feed baby Henry.

"Come, join us," Tanna said.

A tiny smile formed, and Uden joined the group around the main fire pit. She was silent.

Corandra cooed and giggled.

People filed past, collecting hand print clay pieces to remind them they were now one people.

Ambrena handed a clay hand cast to Rusty. The young girls laughed and smiled, their tales too low for Tanna to hear.

Many people would move from one villa to another, and some would stay here in Shells. It would be the most exciting, and fun filled winter. However, there would be sad days. Days when those who died would be remembered with longing. And others remembered with fear. She, and many others, would be there to lead the people through.

Tanna held baby Henry.

Naom slept at her feet.

Logan and Kol followed Rusty watching for dropped crumbs from the travel cake she carried.

Ambrena gently tugged her sleeve.

The hope of a new community rested on the life of each and every one here today. As well as those in Almond villa.

The Pit Miners had to be strong to face the mental and physical challenges ahead.

**###**

Thank you for reading Trails: Pit Miners - Tales. I hope you enjoyed this journey through the tales. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer.

Thanks!

Gail Brown



# About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

# Other Books by Gail Brown

## Concurrent Earths

Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

These stories reach to us across the stars. They share a thought, a dream, or a hope. Stories that touch the heart and soul.

Whether a single individual, a community, or a society, each story delves into specific situations, and how they might benefit society.

Or, how they might go wrong.

Very wrong.

## **Galataria's Echoes**

Galataria survived the Devolution War generations ago. The human population saved the planet. Now they too are on the brink of extinction.

Memories of a war they have never seen cross the dimensional boundary to Kalara and Leonard.

At least, they think the dreams are nightmares of Galataria's past.

For Shalin and Jendal on Earth, the dreams are peaceful and serene. A beauty in life they have never seen.

Dreams bring a bit of both worlds across the unrecognized bridge into the other.

Galataria and Earth are threatened with ideas, and a life most don't recognize, and many fear.

# **Trails Series**

## **Trails: First Generation**

Pair 1, Book 1  
Trails 1: Fault Lines

Pair 1, Book 2  
Trails 2: Volcano

Disaster builds on disaster.

The Earth shakes and begins the process of opening the Rio Sea, where once a great ocean thrived.

As the shaking continues, Yellowstone awakes, blanketing much of the continent with ash, and inducing a multi-year winter and famine for those who survived the quakes, volcano, and societal unrest.

The rules have changed. Competition is no longer king.

People and animals must adapt to a changed world, reliant on each other.

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